NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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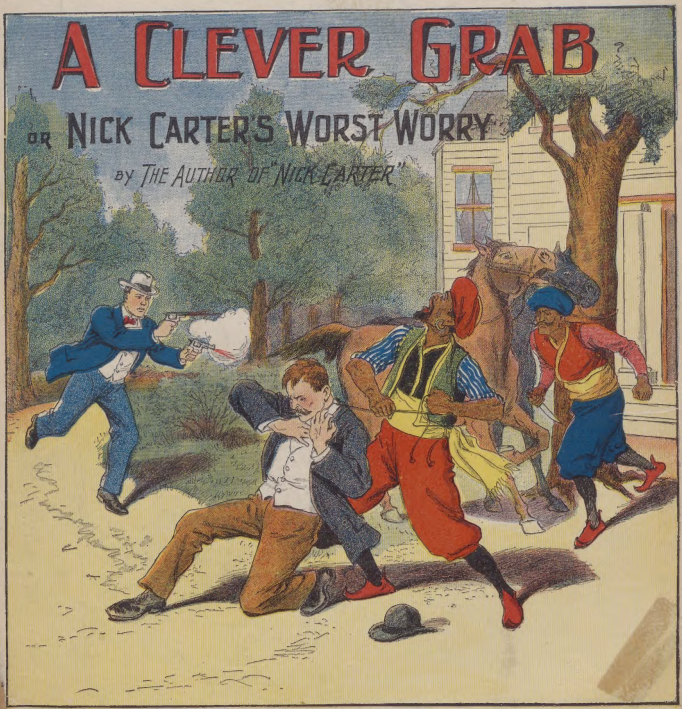
A CLEVER GRAB

OR NICK CARTER'S WORST WORRY

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



The other Hindu who had been stealing forward with the knife in his grasp fell to the earth with a bullet through his knee.

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A CLEVER GRAB;

OR,

Nick Carter's Worst Worry.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

WHERE FIVE WENT IN—AND FOUR CAME OUT.

"Five men went in, but only four came out," said Nick Carter. "Where do you suppose the fifth man can be?"

He turned, tentatively, to his companion as he asked the question, and raised himself from the stooping posture he had assumed during the last ten minutes.

Payne Marshall shrugged his shoulders and flicked the ashes from his cigar before he replied.

"Must be inside," he said then, laconically.

The two were standing near one of the pillars of the wide gate which was the entrance to the spacious grounds which surrounded the magnificent residence of Gilbert Owen, where it overlooks the Hudson River within less than an hour's ride from the City of New York.

The gate was a wide one; so wide in fact that two carriages might have passed each other between the enormous pillars of granite upon which the wrought iron gates were hung.

The gates were closed and securely locked together. Indeed, they had the appearance of not having been disturbed for weeks, or even months, and the grounds inside suggested the same idea.

The once magnificent lawn had grown up to hay, and had ripened and withered in the sun.

Weeds choked the pathways and tufts of grass had struggled through the interstices of the graveled roadway.

The whole place looked deserted, forlorn, neglected, and the mansion, also of granite, and situated a thousand feet or more distant from where they were standing, suggested desertion also, even from that distance.

A stone wall, eight feet high and surmounted by iron spikes and broken glass set in the mortar, extended away in either direction from the huge pillars at the gate.

The time was early morning, for the sun had just risen.

Nick Carter and his companion had approached the spot on horseback, and the two animals were now stamp-

ing and tossing their heads in impatience where they had been fastened to ornamental hitching posts which flanked the gateway on either side.

"The gate was opened, sometime during the night," said the detective, "and it was opened with a key which fitted the lock."

"I don't see anything remarkable about that," drawled his friend. "It couldn't very well have been opened with a key which did not fit the lock, could it?"

"I mean that the lock was not picked."

"Oh; I see."

"I doubt if it could be picked; I doubt even if I could do that act, and I am rather expert at that sort of thing."

"Have to be, eh? I suppose? In your business?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind telling me how you know that five men went in there and only four came out?"

"Not at all. Come here and I will show you."

The detective drew his companion forward until they stood almost against the right half of the gate as they faced it.

"If you will stoop down, Payne, as you saw me do just now, and will put all your energies into your eyes, you will see something."

"On the roadway inside the gate, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"What will I see? What shall I look for?"

"Footprints."

"What!—on that flinty roadway?"

"It isn't as flinty as you suppose. Try it."

Payne Marshall complied.

He stooped low, clinging with his hands to the gate as he did so, and began the inspection.

"By Jove, I do see them!" he exclaimed, after a pause. "But I'm blessed if I understand how you make it out that a certain number of men passed the spot in either direction."

"Because my eyes are better than yours, and because it is my profession, my business to see things where others would pass them by, unheeded. We must get inside these grounds, my friend."

"You will have to scale the wall to do it," replied Marshall, shrugging his shoulders; "and that doesn't look like a pleasant occupation so early in the morning, to say nothing of the chance of being caught in the act. A chap would tear his clothing to bits on those spikes and that glassware up there. I think you had best count me out on that job, Nick."

"Oh, I intended to count you out, old fellow. Did I say, we? I meant I. I must get inside."

"Over the wall, Nick?"

"Why, yes; that will be the easiest way since the lock is one which I doubt if I could manage."

"Going to fly?"

"No; I'm going to jump."

"JUMP! Great Scott, Nick, you don't mean to say—— Why, the thing is preposterous!"

The detective smiled.

"Wait a moment and I will show you how it can be done," he said. "But first, I wish to give you your instructions."

"Fire away. I'll do anything so long as you don't ask me to go over that wall."

"When I am inside, I wish you to take the horses down the road to that point from which we could see the corner of the front piazza as we approached. Do you remember where it was?"

"Perfectly."

"Very well; go there and wait for me. Keep your eyes on that corner of the piazza. When I want you, I will wave a handkerchief from there and then you can mount, and lead my horse back here to the gate."

"All right. That's easy. I can do all that like a book."

"It will be better, for many reasons, that you should wait there instead of here. If anything should happen which renders it impossible for me to signal to you from that corner of the piazza, I will call to you with a pistol shot. That would mean the same thing as the handkerchief."

"I understand; I am to come to this gate with the horses. All right. Now, I want to see you make that jump."

The detective glanced sharply up and down the road in order to make certain that they were still alone on that thoroughfare, and perceiving that there was nobody in sight, he crossed the road quickly to the horse he had ridden, unhitched him and leaped into the saddle.

"This bay hunter of yours, Payne, is a good sixteen hands, I should say," he said, quietly.

"Sixteen and a half to a dot, Nick. He weighs——"

"Never mind what he weighs; we're not talking horse now."

"That's so. Well——?"

"Take him by the bit, please, and hold him; make him stand."

"Oh, he'll stand for me all right."

"Very good! Now watch me."

The detective had ridden up close to the wall so that the horse almost touched it; and now, with a light and quick motion he threw himself slightly forward, and then with his hand on the pommel of the saddle, raised himself with apparently no effort at all, until he was standing upright, like a circus rider, on the horse's back.

He had fully three feet to cover in the leap he was about to make, if the dangerous iron spikes along the top of the wall are taken into consideration, and it was rather an uncertain foothold from which he was compelled to start.

There was the danger of a slip on the smooth saddl

upon which he stood; there was the danger that the horse might start forward, or move, just at the critical moment, and if either of these things happened, it was as certain as fate that the detective would be impaled upon the iron spikes.

But he did not hesitate. Nick Carter never did hesitate in anything he had determined to do.

"Hold him, Payne. Remember my instructions."

"Yes."

"Steady, now."

Nick Carter crouched slightly, and then, as if there were springs beneath his feet, he shot into the air, cleared the wall and the spikes along the top of it and disappeared on the other side.

In a moment more he appeared at the gate.

"All right, Payne," he said, as his companion, having mounted the horse he had ridden to the place, halted for a moment in the road, so that the two were now within sight of each other, but with the apparently insurmountable gate between them.

"Best jump I ever saw, Nick, bar none," he said, with a laugh. "I shouldn't wonder if you could beat Cardinal, here; the big bay, you know. Well, I'm off. I see somebody coming up the road. I reckon it's one of the watchmen around this place. Don't forget that I told you there are four of them."

"No."

"Two at night and two more during the day."

"I remember."

"Then it's a pistol shot or the handkerchief which brings me back here, eh?"

"Just that and nothing else, if it takes all day."

The horses' hoofs clattered along the road to the northward, and Nick Carter turned away from the gate.

But an observer would have noticed that he kept along the grass at the side of the roadway instead of following in the middle of it.

He moved very slowly, too, and with his eyes bent searchingly upon the bed of the road.

"Five came in and four went out," he mused, aloud; and then, after a moment of hiatus, he added:

"Where is the fifth man now?"

Presently, at a place where there was a bend in the road, he stopped, and after studying the unfrequented path in silence for awhile, he dropped upon his hands and knees, and having taken a magnifying glass from his pocket, he spent fully ten minutes in a careful examination of the place.

The roadway was somewhat softer here than at any place where he had previously searched and the footprints were therefore more distinct—although that is not the proper adjective to use, since there was nothing which could be called distinct about them.

But the magnifying glass aided him amazingly, and when at last he rose to his feet, there was a smile of satisfaction on his face.

"One of the five was a woman," he said aloud, addressing the trees around him. "Humph! I wonder if Payne Marshall's suspicions are correct, after all? I wonder—but what is the use of wondering? The thing to do is to find out.

"When the four started to return, they approached the gate in pairs. One of the pairs—that is, two of the persons—came by the roadway and therefore passed this spot; but they were both men. The other pair came down through the grass and entered the road halfway between here and the gate.

"Now, the first thing for me to do is to find out if the woman was one of the four persons who went out, or if she was the one who was left here.

"I'll have to go back toward the gate in order to do that—back to the spot where the other pair entered the road. Fortunately I know just where that is."

The detective retraced his steps rapidly to a point where he had noticed that two of the people whose tracks he was studying had entered the road on their return, and there he again dropped upon his knees and had recourse to his glass.

A moment's search satisfied him, and he leaped to his feet again.

"The woman went out," he said.

It has been said that the grass was tall, that it was sun-dried and withered, and therefore it will be readily understood by any person who has walked through grass in that condition, that an unmistakable path had been left behind these two who had walked to the road through it.

As Nick looked along where they had come he could see every inch of the route they had taken, until that backward track disappeared behind a thick spruce.

"This is certainly taking a track backward," he mused, as he hurried along; "but it wil' be a track forward before many hours have passed, unless I am greatly mistaken."

He arrived at the spruce tree by a shorter cut than the two whose tracks he was following had pursued, and from there, as he had suspected, the trail led onward toward the mansion, big, and tall and gloomy even on that sunny morning.

It led, in fact, straight to the wide steps which ascended to the broad and spacious piazza.

Nick ascended the steps and tried to open the great front door of the house.

He found that it was locked, of course, but this lock, unlike the one at the gate, was not competent to defy his skill, and in a twinkling he had out his magic pick-lock and had shot back the bolt.

But even then the door defied him, and he knew, after a second trial, that the door was not only bolted, but that it was also barred on the inside.

"Good," he said to himself. "If they entered the house at all it is certain that they did not do it through that door."

Next he examined the windows which opened upon the piazza, but only a moment was required at each one to convince him that they were equally secure.

"I doubt," mused the detective, "if they entered the house at all. However, I will determine that question more definitely a little later.

"It is certain that they came upon the piazza, but what did they do——"

He paused suddenly in his reflections, for in the glance which he then swept along the broad expanse of the place where he was standing, he discovered something which surprised him, and which also rather confounded an unvoiced theory he already had in his mind about the occurrences at the Gilbert Owen place.

Two or three quick strides took him to the point of his discovery, and in another moment he was bending over a large red stain on the polished wood.

"Blood," he muttered, "and lots of it."

Indeed, there was no mistaking the fact.

The stain itself, which had first attracted his attention when he turned that way from his examination of the windows, was as large as the top of an ordinary pail, and from there it crept in a tiny stream to the edge of the piazza where it had fallen to the ground below in sufficient quantity to make a large blotch of it.

"Blood, and lots of it," he repeated.

It was not yet dry, although the sun was at that moment shining upon it; but the night air and the dew had kept it fresh since it had fallen.

The detective looked at his watch, and remarked that the time was not yet half-past five. The reader has already understood that the season of the year was midsummer.

"So," he mused, while he began rapidly to examine the space surrounding the discovery he had made, "whatever it was that happened, it occurred since midnight. I would swear to that. I could almost be sure that it was as late as two this morning, if not later than that, even."

He leaped from the piazza to the ground, and began, quite eagerly, to search around the spot where the blood had fallen from the edge of the boards.

He got down on his hands and knees and pushed aside each blade of grass with tender touches; he made use of his magnifying glass; now and then he turned and worked away from the piazza in one direction or another; and then, suddenly, he seemed to give up his search, for he started away at a rapid walk, all the while keeping his eyes fixed upon the ground before him, like an Indian who follows a trail which no other person can see.

For a hundred yards, he traveled almost in a direct line, but then the trail turned and led him directly toward a thick grove of spruces—one of many on the place.

At the edge of this grove, the detective halted and for the first time since he left the piazza, raised his head and looked around him.

"The secret is in here—inside this grove of spruces whatever it is," he said.

It was impossible to pass between the trees where he stood, for they had been planted much too closely together to permit of that; but there was a passageway among them, to the right, and he followed it unhesitatingly.

The passageway turned and twisted as he advanced; indeed, it was as if the owner of the place, when he planted the spruces there, had sought to create a maze of natural growth.

That he had succeeded in doing so was quite evident to Nick, for he presently found himself in a veritable *cul de sac*, from which there was no escape save by retreat—by retracing his steps.

He had been so confident, when he entered the passage among the trees, that it would lead him directly to what he sought, that he had given no further heed to the trail he had been following, but now he realized that if he would come speedily upon the solution of the mystery, he must return to the point of entrance and again take up the trail.

And this he did do, but not without considerable difficulty, for twice he turned aside into the wrong passage.

"It is a maze sure enough," he muttered, when he again came upon the trial—a trial, by the way, which consisted merely of spots of blood upon the ground, or against a blade of grass.

Here, under the trees, the difficulty in following them was increased. The sun could not penetrate to the interior of that grove, and moreover, the dried needles from the spruces, which covered the ground, were themselves almost the color of blood.

But he followed the trail successfully, and presently found himself in a broad, clear space apparently in the very center of the grove.

But that was not all. In the very center of this remarkable space, stretched at full length upon his back, was the body of a man—of a gentleman in evening dress; and there was a crush hat and a naked sword on the ground beside him.

CHAPTER II.

A TREACHEROUS BLOW.

The detective leaped forward quickly and got upon one knee beside the body, and he instantly discovered that the man was not dead.

Indeed, when Nick Carter leaned over him, he opened his eyes for one instant and made one pathetic effort to smile; then he closed them again.

"Are you conscious?" asked Nick, speaking as ten

as a woman. "Do not try to answer me in words, but if you understand what I say, move your eyelids. That will be sufficient answer for the present."

The man's eyelids flickered half open, and then closed together again.

The detective had not been idle while he was speaking. Always, he made it a point to carry with him a small flask which held a gill of the best French brandy, and now he produced this and poured about half a teaspoonful between the lips of the semi-conscious man.

He waited a moment, and then when the wounded man again opened his eyes—widely this time—he said, hastily:

"Don't try to speak—yet. Wait until I tell you to do so;" and he administered a second dose of the cognac.

Again he waited, and presently, when he discovered that the wounded man was breathing quite regularly, although faintly, he said to him:

"If you can answer me in a whisper, do so. First, tell me your name."

"Percy Owen," came the whispered response.

"Gilbert Owen's son?"

"Yes."

"And your present address?"

"I have none—in this country."

"Then tell me the address of some person who knows you, and who knows about you."

"There is one—who used to know me—years ago. I doubt if he will remember me now. He, like others in this country, believes me dead, as I soon will be."

The man spoke haltingly, and with long intervals between the words at times, but we will not endeavor here to portray his manner of speech, but merely what he said.

"Tell me his name," said Nick.

"Payne Marshall. He lives near here."

"I know him," said Nick. "Now, swallow a little more of this brandy, for there are more questions which I must ask you, before I disturb you in order to examine your wound."

The brandy was administered, in a greater quantity this time, and after waiting a time, the detective began again.

"There were four people with you when you came here last night, weren't there?" he asked.

"No; only one."

"Then there were three others who followed you."

"Yes."

"One of them was a woman?"

"She came with me."

"Ah! I begin to understand. You had the key to the gate?"

"Yes."

"And did not lock it again after you entered the grounds?"

"No."

"Did you also possess a key to the house?"

"I did, but I suppose it has been taken from me."

"What time did you arrive here?"

"After midnight; about one o'clock."

"You feel a little stronger now, don't you?"

"Yes. I think the bleeding has stopped."

"Don't attempt to move or you will start it again. Here, take another swallow of this."

The brandy was administered again and the wounded man became perceptibly stronger.

"Do you know the names of the men who followed you here?" asked Nick.

"Yes."

"Tell me their names, and especially the name of the man who wounded you."

"I would rather not do that."

"Was it a duel?" asked the detective, trying a different tack.

"Yes; but an unfair one. I would have defeated my adversary but for that treacherous stab in the back."

"Tell me the name of the person who did that."

"No; I will not tell you, now."

"Perhaps you may never have another chance," said Nick. He was annoyed at the obstinacy of the wounded man.

"I think I will. I believe that I will live, now that you have come to my aid; but if I find that I am going to die, I will tell you all."

"Who was the woman who came here with you?"

"My wife."

"She seems to have gone away willingly with them, after you were wounded and left here to die."

"She could not help herself."

"What were those men to her?"

"One was her father, one her brother; the other was a servant."

"Do you think that she deserted you willingly?"

"No; nothing could make me believe that."

"She seems to have offered no resistance to their taking her away."

"She could not if she would; she could not, I tell you."

"Why did you come here to this deserted house, alone with your wife, at that hour of the night, Mr. Owen?"

"The house is mine, until I am proved dead. It was left to me by my father. I was supposed to be dead, but there has never been proof of it, and the estate could not be administered until I appeared, or until there was proof of my death."

"I am quite aware of that; but that does not inform me why you chose to come here at that hour."

"Who are you, sir? Perhaps I might answer that question if I—if I believed that I might confide in you."

"I am Nicholas Carter, a friend of Payne Marshall, whose name you just mentioned, and your friend if you will permit it."

"Nick Carter, the detective?"

"Yes."

"I knew about you before I went away, but that was long ago. I was quite young, then, but now I seem to be a hundred years old."

Nick had a sudden inspiration.

"Would you be willing to confide in Payne Marshall if he were here?" he asked.

"Yes."

"He is outside the grounds now, waiting for me, but the gate is locked. He cannot get inside. The men who left you here to die carried the key away with them."

"There is another—if you could only get it."

"Where is it?"

"Inside the house. In the library. My father kept it there for emergencies. It should be inside the big colonial clock, at the bottom."

"Good! I will find a way to get it when I need it. You say you had a key to the house?"

"Yes."

"Do you think those men took it from you?"

"I don't know. I suppose they did so—after I was unconscious. They knew why I came here. They knew what is inside the house that I came here to find."

"In which pocket did you carry the key? Perhaps I can search for it without disturbing you."

"In my waistcoat pocket, on the left side. Perhaps I—"

"Don't move, if you have any desire to live," said the detective, quickly. "Your wound has stopped bleeding, but the slightest muscular effort on your part, would start it afresh. If the key is there, I will find it."

With a touch as delicate as a feather the detective inserted his fingers inside the pocket mentioned, and drew them forth, empty.

"The key is not there," he said.

"I thought not," replied Owen.

It may seem strange to the reader that Nick Carter would permit the wounded man to lie there on the ground all this time, while he questioned him, but the detective believed that Percy Owen would die within a few minutes after he was moved. He judged this from the quantity of blood he believed the man had lost, which could only have come from a serious wound.

Moreover, it must be remembered that it was midsummer and that the morning was unusually warm.

There, under the cool shade of the spruces with the heated air around and about him, and stretched upon the thick coating of the needles which had dropped from the spruces year after year, Percy Owen was as comfortable as he could be made—at least for the present.

The detective had already removed his own coat and slipped it under the head of the wounded man, and the brandy he had administered to him had warmed and soothed him.

"Are you in pain?" asked the detective, after a short pause during which he was trying to decide what was best to do.

"No."

"If I leave you where you are for a time, while I procure assistance, will you promise me on your honor that you will not attempt to move at all?"

"Yes; I will promise. Only give me more of the brandy before you go.

"Thank you," he added, when Nick complied with the request. "I have suffered worse tortures than this during the last four years, Mr. Carter."

"Where?" asked Nick.

"In India."

The detective pondered over this answer for a moment, and a new light broke upon him as he did so.

Presently, very quietly, and in a low tone, he asked:

"Did you find your wife out there? In India?"

"Yes," came the unthinking reply, "she is the daughter of a mahara——" He broke off suddenly, and would have moved angrily had not Nick placed a gentle but restraining hand upon him.

"I think I understand now, Mr. Owen," he said. "You must not be angry because you said more than you intended to say. I am thinking only of your interests. You were on the point of telling me that she is the daughter of a maharaja of India, and that because you stole her away and married her, you were captured and imprisoned there; and that later you managed to escape, perhaps with her aid, and you fled together to this country. Is it not so?"

"Yes; but how——"

"I manage to read between the lines in cases of this kind. Her father and brother, with a servant, traced you here, did they not?"

"Certainly, since they were here within a few hours after our own arrival."

"Perhaps they did not even take the trouble to trace you; perhaps they already knew that you would come directly here—to this house in fact."

"I had not thought of that, but it is true. I said enough during my imprisonment to make them positive of that much."

"And now, Mr. Owen, with whom were you fighting and who was it who stabbed you in the back?"

"The duel was with the brother. I will not tell you more than that now. Later, I think I will do so."

"Very well. I am going for assistance now. Will you keep your promise and remain perfectly still while I am gone?"

"Yes; I will pledge you my word to that—but don't be longer than necessary."

"No," replied Nick, and he turned away.

He could not see the dusky figure, almost naked, which had been standing at the entrance to the passage among the trees, throughout most of this conversation,

flitted away ahead of him too quickly, and as silently as a shadow.

Somewhere in that labyrinth of passages, it disappeared, and Nick Carter hastened on, ignorant of the dread danger in which he had left Percy Owen.

CHAPTER III.

A FIGHT IN THE DARK.

We will follow the course taken by Nick Carter, for he was in great haste.

He knew that to procure assistance for the wounded man, and to get it to his side, one of two things was necessary; either he must possess himself of the key to the gate before he signaled to Marshall, or he must send to the authorities of the township and have the gate blown open in order to admit a physician.

There were many objections to the latter course, chief among them being the fact that it would occupy too much time, for there might be unlimited yards of red tape to unreel before an official could be found who would consent to such an undertaking.

Again, there were reasons why he considered it best to keep the whole matter as secret as possible; and he believed that he would experience very little difficulty in gaining an entrance to the house and so procuring the key to which Percy Owen had directed him.

The reader is as yet unaware of the circumstance which brought Nick Carter, accompanied by his friend, Payne Marshall, to the vicinity of the Gilbert Owen mansion thus early in the morning, but that part of the story comes in naturally later on.

Entrance to the house was obtained much more easily than even the detective had anticipated.

The windows of the ground floor were battened tightly and doubtless barred inside, but he discovered one in the rear of the house, on the second floor, where for some reason this precaution had not been taken.

He was on the point of attempting an entrance by this means when he bethought him of the fact that there was at least one door of the house which was not barred on the inside, and which he could open readily enough with his pick-lock.

It proved to be a side door, and it resisted his efforts not at all, for his magic little instrument soon threw back the bolt of the lock, and he stepped inside the house.

The interior of the house was as dark as black darkness can be, and for once the detective was without his pocket lantern; the little searchlight was inside a pocket of the coat he had left for a pillow under the wounded man's head.

But he had his match box, filled with vestas, and with the aid of these he speedily made his way to the library.

The key was there, at the bottom of the tall clock, as Percy Owen had described it, where it must have reposed ever since old Gilbert Owen placed it there, years before.

As Nick was turning away with the key in his hand, he thought he heard the stealthy tread of some person or animal in the hallway ahead of him, and he halted abruptly and drew a revolver from his hip pocket.

After that, he stood still, listening intently, but when several moments had passed and he detected no repetition of the sound, he went cautiously forward.

"Rats, doubtless," was the thought that was in his mind, but nevertheless he was thoroughly on his guard and prepared for anything that might happen.

When he arrived at the doorway which communicated between the library and the hall, he extinguished the vesta he was carrying in his hand, waited an instant, and then leaped suddenly through the doorway.

As he crossed the threshold thus swiftly—and in utter darkness remember—he heard an angry swish behind him, such as might have been made by a whiplash passing swiftly through the air, and he instantly realized that he was attacted by a man, and that that man was, without doubt, one of the Hindus who had followed Percy Owen to America.

He knew what that angry, swishing noise meant—he knew what made it.

It was not the first time in his life when he had been attacked by a strangler, and he realized that he had never been in more deadly peril in his life than he was at that moment.

If he had attempted to pass through that doorway slowly and naturally, the deadly cord would have tightened around his neck, and he would already have been in the last throes of expiring life.

When the noise came so suddenly behind him, he crouched again, and made a second leap without pausing, this time alighting upon his toes so that he made as little noise as possible—and then he wheeled and fired his revolver point-blank through the darkness, at the point where he believed his assailant should be standing.

It is remarkable how the flash of a weapon thus discharged in total darkness will for an instant throw everything distinctly into view.

It is like a flash of lightning through the darkness of an impenetrable night—and quite as sudden.

By its aid, Nick Carter saw that he had correctly guessed the location of the man, but also that he had fired over his head, for the strangler was crouching against the wall beside the library door.

Instantly he lowered the muzzle of his weapon and fired again, but in this flash he saw nothing at all. The strangler had somehow disappeared, but whether he had entered the library, or was somewhere between him and the way out of the house, the detective could not determine.

He had seen, in that first flash, that the East Indian was almost naked, and the detective had no doubt that the

fellow had come there to prosecute his search for whatever it was that Percy Owen had sought the preceding night, and had divested himself of his clothing as he would have done in his own country, in order to facilitate his movements.

And he knew, too, that even if he should get his hands upon the Hindu, the fellow, with his oiled body, would squirm out of his grasp.

For a moment the detective remained perfectly still where he stood, listening; and then, as silently as possible, he made his way slowly toward the end of the hall, where there was a door which would admit him to the room he had entered when he came into the house.

Every sense was upon the alert.

He expected to be attacked again at any instant, and he kept the muscles of his neck distended to their utmost lest the cord of the strangler should strike him suddenly and find him unprepared.

But nothing happened.

He arrived at the door, opened it and sprang through into the room where there was light, through the outside door which he had left open, without seeing or hearing another sign of his assailant.

The detective closed the door, then passed outside the house and closed and relocked the outside door; and there, on the grass, in the bright sunlight, he paused.

"By Jove!" he muttered. "For once I am certainly up against it. I have got three distinct and equally important things to do; each one of them should be done immediately and I can't do but one at a time.

"I wonder if that devil inside the house has been to the grove to see his victim? If he has, it is safe to say that Owen is already dead, for he would have killed him, and in that case, assistance would not be necessary; but if the strangler is not there, to go for assistance is the most important thing of the three.

"I ought to go back to the grove to see if Owen is all right; I ought to hurry to the piazza, signal Marshall and then hurry to the gate to give him the key and his instructions, and I ought to remain here and somehow get my hand on that strangler who is prowling around inside the house.

"Which shall I do?"

The question was answered for him at that moment.

He heard a loud shout from the direction of the gate, and he knew instantly that it was Payne Marshall calling to him.

"He couldn't have heard those pistol shots from inside the house," exclaimed the detective to himself, "but, anyhow, that settles it. I'll go to the gate, for Marshall is there."

"Hel-l-l-l-o-o-o-a-a, Nick!" came the shout again, and Nick, with the answering cry of the fox hunter, for that was what Marshall had given, started on a swift run toward the gate.

"I heard your shot, Nick," exclaimed Marshall, as soon as the detective was within hearing. "I came here at once. What the devil kept you so long? I should have been over the fence after you myself in another moment if you had not appeared."

"Heard my shot? Two shots?"

"No; only one."

"Did it sound as if it came from the inside of the house?"

"Certainly not."

Instantly the detective realized that it was not either of the two reports of his own pistol that Marshall had heard.

He extended his hand through the bars of the gate and held out the key so that Marshall could reach it.

"Here, Payne," he said, "take this. It is the key to this gate."

"Where——"

"Don't stop to ask questions now. All will be explained in good time. I want you to ride as fast as you can go, for the nearest doctor, and bring him here at once."

"What the——"

"Tell him to bring everything that is necessary to succor a man who is dying of a stab wound, and who has been slowly bleeding to death for hours."

"But I say, Nick——"

"Please don't interrupt, Payne. Do as I tell you. When you return with the doctor—and you MUST bring one from somewhere—open the gate with that key, let the doctor lead the horses through and then do you see that you lock the gate securely after you. Then leap on your horse again, ride up past the front of the mansion, turn to the right, and you will see a thick grove of spruces. Shout for me when you get near them. That is all. Now, hurry. It is one of your old friends who has been injured, if that information will lend wings to your feet. Go! Go!"

Marshall was off like a shot with the two horses, and Nick Carter turned and ran back toward the grove where he had left Percy Owen.

He did not go around by the road this time, but cut across the lawn so that he was concealed from the house by the trees, and when he came out into the open, he was within a few rods of the grove in which he had left the wounded man.

As he ran, he glanced toward the house, but it stood as grim and silent as ever, and he could see no sign of the Hindu strangler.

It required only a moment more for him to enter the maze of curious pathways which old Gilbert Owen had created when many years ago he planted that grove.

But Nick Carter did not have to pass more than once over a road before he was familiar with it, and he made no mistake this time.

He followed the winding pathway through the labyrinth as unerringly as a hound upon the scent, and in a moment emerged into the glade where he had left the wounded man.

But the instant he entered it, he came to a halt, amazed in spite of himself.

Percy Owen had disappeared.

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed the detective, aloud, "those devils, one or more of them, have been here while I was gone. Ah, why did I not return here first? I might have caught them at their hellish work."

The opera hat and the naked sword were still there where they had fallen, but there was also a third article which the detective knew was not there when he left the place.

He stepped forward quickly and picked it up.

It was a six-chambered revolver of French make—in reality a beautiful weapon.

But it was not this fact which interested the detective; it was the suggestive fact that of the six chambers, five were loaded, while the sixth contained an empty shell.

"This explains the pistol shot that Payne Marshall heard."

He continued his examination of the weapon, and presently discovered, engraved in letters so small that they were at first not discernible, the name of the wounded man.

"Percy Owen," said Nick, aloud. "Is it possible that Owen was attacked here, and that he had strength enough to draw a weapon—this weapon—from his pocket and to fire it at his assailant? By Jove, it looks like it!

"Whoever it was who came here to attack him has carried him away bodily," continued the detective, "and it is equally certain that they could not get off these grounds without passing through the gate."

He examined the ground around the spot where Owen had been lying, with great care, but there was not a sign or a trace of any kind.

"As well search for a needle in a hay stack as to look for tracks on these dry needles," he mused. "The question for me to determine, is where would they take Owen, and what would they do with him?

"The latter of those questions is by far the easier one to answer, for beyond doubt they killed him before they took him out of here; and having killed him—ah!"

Without thinking of his coat, which was still lying on the ground where Owen's head had been pillowed upon, the detective turned and hastened back through the passageway to the outside of the grove.

A careful inspection of the house from that point satisfied him that everything at least appeared as usual, and he turned back again to the passage among the trees.

"It's a thousand to one that the body of Percy Owen is somewhere in this labyrinth," he muttered, "and if I don't find and search every nook and crook and corner of it before I am fifteen minutes older, I'll quit the detective business and retire."

No man has ever possessed more power of concentration than Nicholas Carter, and he realized that he needed every whit of it at that moment.

The man who had planned that maze among the trees, had doubtless done it for the sole purpose of enjoying the sport it would one day afford him, when the trees should have grown and he could take his friends to the grove and induce them to enter it alone; but he had done it well.

If any of the readers have ever entered such a place—they are usually made with innumerable mirrors—the condition of this strange grove may readily be realized; but if not, it is only necessary to draw for yourselves, numberless little squares, each one outside of another, leaving an opening in each square at different points, and then to shut off each square by cross marks in two or three places. After that is done, begin at the center and try to find your way out without crossing a line.

This is about what Nick Carter had to do, only that he had to search every spot in the place, and to know, when the task was completed, that he had not neglected one.

And so, with his whole mind concentrated on his task, and with pistol in hand, he once more entered the labyrinth.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STRANGLER'S DEADLY CORD.

Nick Carter's method for searching the labyrinth was a simple and yet an effective one.

As he entered the place, he discovered a stout stick which had evidently once been used as a post in a croquet set, lying on the ground beside the entrance.

It was a long one, made of hard wood and tipped with a pointed iron at one end, so that it might readily be driven into the ground.

He seized this, and as he walked he dragged that sharp point of iron deep into the soil behind him, thus leaving a perceptible track which could not readily be erased, wherever he went.

In this way he took the first turn to the right and followed it straight to the end, for he knew that it would come to an abrupt end somewhere, as it did, although there were innumerable little passages which opened from it.

Having found the end of the main passage of this *cul de sac,* he started back again, taking the opening which led off from it as he came to them on either side.

There were three of these on one side of the main passage and four on the other, but these were all short and he was not long in searching them.

He returned then to where he had started, and began

with another apparently "main" passageway and searched that and its branches in the same manner—and with the same result.

The third one he tried was even more complicated than the others, and at last, to his surprise, brought him out again into the open air at the opposite side of the grove from which he had entered; but he searched it thoroughly, and also every branch it contained, and then returned to his task anew.

The fourth was almost like the first one, only that it was on the left of the real route to the glade. It also seemed to be the last of the passages, and there was nothing left for him to search now, save two or three small recesses which led off from the genuine route to the central glade.

With a feeling that perhaps after all he had been mistaken, and that the thugs had not concealed the body of their victim within the recesses of the grove, he turned back, took the genuine passage and hurried again to the glade in the center.

There he picked up his coat and put it on, and then, feeling that his search was almost done, he re-entered the passage and stopped at the entrance to the first side recess he came to.

It was smaller in appearance than any of the others, and not one into which any person would be likely to turn, for the reason that from its entrance, the brighter light from the glade could already be discerned, so that a person in walking through the labyrinth would naturally pass it by, almost without seeing it at all.

But the moment Nick Carter passed through the narrow entrance to it, he discovered that he was in a fifth of the so-called "main" passages, and that this one was evidently one of the features of the grove.

He had traversed but a short distance when a brighter glow of light ahead of him told him, as plainly as words could have done, that he was approaching a second glade, and in a moment more he entered it.

It was not a quarter as large as the other, but it contained what he sought, and Nick sprang forward with an exclamation of satisfaction when he saw the outstretched form of Percy Owen, almost in the very center of the place.

"Poor chap!" murmured the detective, bending over him; and then he started with surprise, for the young man was still breathing, although very faintly.

"Owen," he said, gently, "do you hear me? Move your eyelids if you do. It is Nick Carter, returned. Do you hear me, Owen?"

The eyelids moved, almost imperceptibly, yet they moved.

Nick again had recourse to his small flask of brandy, now almost empty, but there was sufficient there to administer another dose or two to the wounded man, and he dropped some of the liquor between his lips.

"Don't make any effort to speak," he commanded. "I have sent for a doctor. He will soon be here. Your wound has not reopened or you would have been dead before this time."

Percy Owen's lips moved. It was evident that he was making an effort to speak, but that he was too weak to utter the words he wished to say—even to whisper them.

"I wish you would not try to talk now," said the detective; but again the lips moved, and evidently with a greater effort than before.

Nick dropped more brandy between his lips—the last there was in the flask—and then, when Owen's lips moved again, he bent down until his ear almost touched them.

"Don't—leave—me," were the words he caught, although they were so faint and seemed to come from so far away that the detective was scarce sure that he heard them at all.

But he replied to them, and quickly.

"No," he said, "I will not leave you. You may rest assured of that. The doctor will be here in a moment, and with him, your old friend, Payne Marshall. When they call to me from outside the grove I must go to them in order to guide them in here to you, for this is a very devil of a place, as you doubtless know. But it will only be for a moment."

Again the lips moved, and again Nick bent down to listen; and again he heard the whispered words:

"Don't—leave—me."

"I won't, Owen; I assure you I will not, only to guide the doctor in here to you from the edge of the grove, and that won't take two, or at the least, three minutes."

"Don't leave—me—for an—instant."

Nick could hear the words without bending over, this time, for Percy Owen seemed to have used every effort he possessed to make that request; and even as he made it, he fainted.

"Poor chap," murmured the detective. "He's got pluck, anyhow. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred in his fix would have been dead long ago."

Nick Carter was at a loss whether to leave him in the condition he was until the arrival of the doctor, or to make some sort of effort to revive him, but he was saved further doubt on that point, for at that instant, from outside the grove, came the resonant and familiar call of Payne Marshall.

Instantly the detective leaped to his feet and darted away.

He hurried through the labyrinth as rapidly as it could be accomplished among all its windings and twistings, and they were legion.

The doctor and Marshall had already dismounted, but they were fully a hundred yards from the entrance to the grove, walking leisurely toward it, leading the horses.

"Please make haste, doctor," called the detective. "Payne, you take the horses and tie them somewhere

will return for you as soon as I have taken the doctor o his patient."

The doctor was a portly man, and not at all inclined o run, and he scarcely increased the length of his strides t Nick Carter's request, and when at last he did arrive at the entrance to the grove, he stopped to mop his forehead, for the day was an exceedingly hot one, and he exertion of riding horseback in the hot sun had almost overcome him.

"Warm day, isn't it?" he panted. "I never was so hot n my life."

"Come, doctor, follow me, if you please. You will find t much cooler inside," said the detective.

"Wonderful place this, isn't it?" panted the doctor, as he hurried after Nick. "Where do all those smaller aisles through the trees lead to? Eh?"

"Nowhere," replied Nick.

"Eh? Nowhere? Then what are they there for?"

"You will have to ask the ghost of old Gilbert Owen hat question."

"I'm not likely to have a chance to do that right away."

"I hope not, doctor. Here we are. This way, if you lease."

Nick pushed the doctor into the narrow passage ahead f him, and then he said:

"Straight forward, now, doctor. The glade where he ies is directly before you."

The doctor went forward, and Nick followed close behind him and in a moment they emerged from the passage nto the glade.

It was a small place, as has been said, and one glance ould comprehend every square inch of it.

The doctor was in front of the detective, and as he epped from the passage, or aisle, he stopped directly the entrance, so that his portly figure entirely cut off ick Carter's view, as well as his ability to pass without forcibly shoving the doctor out of the way.

"Is this a joke, may I ask?" he demanded.

"A joke!" exclaimed Nick. "What do you mean? t me pass, doctor."

"Did you not say that the patient was here? There no one here."

"Great God!" cried the detective; and then, without remony, he pushed the doctor forward and sprang into e glade.

The place was empty—utterly empty.

Percy Owen, wounded and almost dead, had disappeared the second time within an hour.

The doctor began to speak again, but the detective uptly interrupted him.

Taking one of his revolvers from his pocket, he extended it toward the physician.

"Take this, doctor," he said, "you may need it. This seems to be fairly alive with mystery. Remain re, at the opposite side from this entrance, and if any person save myself tries to enter, kill him as you would a snake. But on your life do not attempt to leave this spot till I return."

Without waiting for a reply, the detective turned and rushed away toward the entrance to the grove, for his first impulse was to put Marshall on the watch outside while he should make his second search of the labyrinth.

He remembered how he had discovered a second entrance, and he feared now lest the cunning Hindus should make use of it in some way to frustrate him again.

He began to think that the place was alive with these strangers, who could work so silently and effectually; and of one idea that had occurred to him since his experience inside the mansion, he now felt assured. That was that the maharajah had brought a retinue of followers with him, and that they had been infesting this old Owen place for weeks, awaiting the return of Percy Owen with his bride; and this, and this alone, could account for the presence of stranglers and thugs around the place and for their familiarity with it.

When he darted from the thick grove into the open air, and turned toward the great mansion, on the lawn between him and the house he saw a sight which caused him to draw his revolver, raise it and fire, even as he ran forward with all the speed he could command.

And this is what he saw:

Two turbaned Hindus had attacked Payne Marshall in the very center of the lawn.

One of them—the strangler—had thrown his deadly cord around Marshall's neck, even as the detective appeared, and the other was stealing forward, knife in hand, with the evident intention of finishing the job. The horses were rearing and plunging, and Marshall was already sinking to the ground when Nick Carter fired.

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER MYSTERY OF THE GROVE.

That shot might be called one of the detective's best, for it saved the life of Payne Marshall.

It was a great risk, too, for anyone less accurate in marksmanship than Nick Carter, for it must be remembered that the man he shot at—the strangler—was actually engaged in a struggle with Marshall at the time the bullet was sped, and also that the detective was running with all the speed he possessed at the instant he pulled the trigger.

But Nick Carter never missed his mark.

He had trained himself since early boyhood at pistol shooting, until his unerring accuracy under all circumstances was little less than supernatural.

The instant he emerged from the grove and realized what was taking place, he knew that it was a matter of seconds only, whether his friend, Payne Marshall, lived or

died, for he was only too well aware of the deadly and lightning-like action of the strangler's cord.

And the bullet went true to its aim.

It caught the strangler squarely between the eyes and he pitched forward, dead, almost under the hoofs of one of the plunging horses.

Instantly the strain upon the cord was relieved, and Marshall, who had not yet lost consciousness, and who was naturally strong and lusty, tore it from his throat, even as he also fell to the ground, to which he was fast sinking when the detective fired.

And that was not the only shot which the detective fired at that time.

A second shot followed the first so suddenly that it was merely "crack-crack," as rapidly as one would count "one-two," and with the second report, the other Hindu, he who had been stealing forward with the knife in his grasp, fell to the earth with a bullet through his knee.

Nick Carter never shot to kill unless it was of the utmost necessity, as in the case of the strangler, where it was his life or Payne Marshall's, and so the second shot was meant merely to maim and not to kill.

Besides, even in that instant of time between the two shots, Nick Carter determined that this was a good opportunity to secure a prisoner who could be compelled to reveal many things he wished to know.

Nor did he stop running even after the second shot.

The two horses, still wearing their saddles of course, freed from all restraint, and frightened more than ever by the pistol shots, were now careering wildly around the grounds, and Marshall was just struggling weakly to his feet when the detective reached him.

The wounded Hindu was writhing upon the ground with his broken knee, and cursing deeply in his own tongue.

But Nick Carter paid no attention to him. He ran directly to his friend and assisted him to his feet.

Payne Marshall was still half dazed by what had happened, and he blinked at Nick in a manner that would have been ludicrous under any other circumstances.

"What the devil was it, Nick?" he demanded, presently, "a boa constrictor, a cyclone, or did I throw a fit?"

"It was a mighty close call for you, old chap," replied the detective.

"Humph! I felt as if I had been hung and brought to life again."

"Well," replied Nick, "that is a fairly accurate description of what happened to you."

It was just at that moment that Payne Marshall's eyes lighted upon the writhing Hindu with the broken knee. He had not as yet discovered the dead man.

"Who's your friend, Nick?" he asked, "and what's the matter with him?"

"He hurt his knee," replied the detective, grimly.

"Oh, I see. Say, didn't I hear a pistol shot?"

"Two of them."

"Where's the other victim?"

"Look behind you."

Marshall turned and regarded the dead strangler calmly.

"Looks rather as if he was down and out, doesn't it, Nick?" he asked.

"Rather."

"How did it all happen?"

"Don't you know?"

"Not a thing in the world."

"Tell me what you do know."

"Why, I was standing here holding the horses, waiting for you to come out of that beastly grove. There wasn't any convenient place to tie them—that is, any place that was near enough, so I thought I'd wait."

"Well?"

"Well, I was standing right about here, I think, when all of a sudden something hit me and in an instant almost, everything seemed to grow black, and I felt something slimy against me. I'll take my oath I thought it was a snake, Nick."

"It was—a human snake. The most deadly venomous of its kind in the world. A Hindu strangler."

"Oh, come now, I say! We're not in India, you know."

"There is the cord. You just tore it from your own throat; and there is the dead strangler whom I had to shoot to save your life. Thank God those devils or their confederates stole Owen away again, or I——"

"What's that?"

"Or I should not have been out here in time to save you. If I had been one second later, you would have been a dead man."

"B-r-rrr! I suppose you know that I'm grateful and——"

"Drop it, Payne. Never mind all that."

"Didn't you say something about somebody's stealing somebody else away?"

"Yes. That was what saved your life."

"Well, that's what I meant when I interrupted you just now. Didn't you say Owen?"

"Yes."

"You didn't happen to refer to old Gilbert, did you? He's been dead too many years for anybody to want to steal him, you know."

"No; I mean his son—Percy Owen."

"Percy Owen, Nick? What of him?"

"He was the fifth one of that party who came here last night. The one who came in and who did not go out."

"Percy Owen! Is it possible? Everybody believed him to be dead."

"I suspect they are right by this time," was Nick's reply. "I found him in the grove, dying, but

ceeded in reviving him sufficiently so that he told me his name and a few things about the affair of last night. Then I left him in order to break into the house and find a key to the big gate in a place where he said his father always kept an extra one. I found it and took it to you as you know, but while I was away some of these brown devils stole him away, and hid him in another part of the grove.

"I found him, however, and I stayed beside him until I heard you call. Then, as you know, I came out and got the doctor, and although I was not away from him more than five minutes, they had managed to get their claws on him again, for when I took the doctor to the place where I left him, he had disappeared a second time.

"And now we ought to go to the doctor, if you are able to walk, for he must be getting nervous by this time."

"Nervous nothing! You couldn't make Doc Whitehall nervous if you chucked him, naked, into a bed of nettles. Hadn't you better take a look at that chap with the bu'sted knee?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

Then he turned and walked toward the wounded man.

"Drop that knife!" he said to him, in Hindustanee. "Throw it on the ground where I can pick it up or I will break your other knee for you."

The man obeyed in silence.

"Get up on your good leg, now," was the next command, "and hop along as best you can to the edge of that grove. I don't propose to let you get away, or to let any of your friends take you away, either. Come along, Payne," he added, in English, to his friend.

"I say, Nick, what are you going to do with this dead one?"

"I'm going to leave him where he is for the present."

"It's rather hot out here, Nick, and the flies——"

"It's a whole lot hotter where that strangler has gone. They are only human snakes, Payne, as I told you a moment ago. Come; we must go to the doctor."

"And the horses?"

"The horses can take care of themselves for a little while. There is good pasture for them here."

The wounded Hindu had been hopping along obediently toward the grove during this conversation, and was now almost there; but Nick and Marshall quickly caught up with him, and they soon arrived at the edge of the grove close to the entrance to the labyrinth.

"Now," said the detective, "I'll show you how to fix a man so that he can't get away or be carried away when we don't want to stay around and watch him."

The detective walked along the edge of the grove a little way until he found what he wanted and then he called to the Hindu to him.

"Get down on the ground with your back to that tree," he commanded, in Hindustance. It was a small tree, not larger than a man's leg.

When the Hindu had obeyed, Nick stepped partly behind the tree, and suddenly drawing the man's arms behind him, he handcuffed his wrists together around the tree.

"There," he said, rising. "If his friends try to carry him off during the few minutes we are absent, I reckon they'll have to take the tree along."

"Isn't that rather cruel, Nick?" asked Marshall.

"Perhaps; but it will have to be done for the present. There is no other way. Besides, we won't be long. Come on, now, I am getting anxious about the doctor. The devil seems to be frolicking in that grove to-day, Payne."

The detective led the way into the labyrinth, walking rapidly, while Payne Marshall followed close behind him.

They were only a moment in arriving at the little glade where Nick had left the doctor, revolver in hand. But now, when they entered it, the place was empty.

The doctor had in turn disappeared.

CHAPTER VI.

ONE MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

For a moment after the discovery that the doctor was also missing, even the detective was nonplused. Then he turned to Marshall.

"I gave him one of my guns and told him to sit over there, facing this entrance," he said. "I told him to shoot the first person he saw, but it looks as if——"

"Hil-l-l-l-o-o-o-a-a!"

The cry was loud and clear and seemed to proceed from a point almost at their elbows.

It was the fox hunter's cry of the county, and Marshall recognized the doctor's voice instantly.

"There he is, Nick," he said; and then he raised his voice and shouted:

"Hello, doc!"

"Hello, yourself!" replied the doctor, seemingly from a distance of not more than twenty feet away. "Where in blazes are you?"

"Right here," replied Marshall, laughing.

"Well, I'm right here; and say, Payne, if you'll find me inside of a week I'll treat. I'm blessed if I can find myself."

"Why didn't you wait here, as I asked you to do?" asked Nick.

"Well, Mr. Carter, to tell you the truth, I couldn't. I heard guns a-shooting, and I made up my mind that there was some sort of a scrap on the carpet. I thought I'd take a hand in it if there was."

"And I suppose you've been looking for us ever since, eh?" asked Marshall.

"Looking for you? Say, Payne, if I haven't walked

three miles inside this infernal place I'll eat the grove. And, I say, Carter!"

"Well?"

"The next time you have a hurry call for a phantom patient, would you mind furnishing a chart of the locality? How many acres are there in these woods, anyhow? My own place contains sixteen and I'm sure you could drop it inside here and lose it."

"If you will remain where you are, I'll find you in a few moments," said the detective.

"Oh, I'll stay. I'm rooted here until somebody comes to my assistance. I'm lost in the woods, I am."

"If you will whistle one of your favorite airs, and keep whistling it for a while, it won't take me long to find you."

"All right. 'Just tell them that you saw me' seems to fit this case;" and immediately the doctor began to whistle vigorously.

Nick conducted Payne Marshall back to the wounded Hindu, cautioned him to be thoroughly on his guard with his revolver in his hand ready for instant use, and then hurried into the maze.

His previous examination of the labyrinth had made him quite familiar with it, and he thought he knew almost the exact location of the doctor; nor was he mistaken, for after a search of five minutes, during which he went wrong twice, he came upon the portly physician.

He was seated on the ground with his back against the trees, calmly smoking a cigar, and when the detective came upon him, he rose calmly to his feet and extended his hand.

"How are you, Mr. Carter?" he said, quite solemnly, although his eyes were twinkling. "I'm glad to see you. You are quite welcome, I assure you. Nice and cool in here, isn't it?"

Nick laughed.

"If you will tell me how in thunder you are able to find your way about this place, you will do me an everlasting favor," continued the doctor.

"Follow me," replied Nick, "and I'll show you."

He turned and without more words they made their way to the open.

"Carter," said the doctor, when he found himself safely outside the grove, "permit me to congratulate you. I could have sworn that it was at least six miles to this place, and you have covered the distance in about a minute and a half. But, seriously, did you ever see or hear of such a confounded place as that is, before now?"

"No," said Nick, "I never did."

"How big a patch of ground do you suppose that grove covers?"

"About an acre, I should say."

"Hello! what have you got here?" asked the doctor, suddenly discovering the wounded Hindu.

"Well, doctor," replied Nick, "you know we couldn't find the patient I brought you here to see, so I've supplied you with another. He was trying to kill Payne, and so I put a bullet in his knee. There is another one out there in the middle of the lawn who doesn't require your attention."

The doctor was mystified and asked for an explanation, which was soon given him.

Soon after that, Payne Marshall mounted one of the horses and rode to the village to notify the coroner and an undertaker, and also to send out a conveyance for the doctor and the wounded man, and when at last they were driven away, Nick said to the physician:

"Doctor, this fellow is a valuable piece of property to me just now, and whatever disposition you make of him, I'm going to ask you to have a good guard set over him all the time. He must not escape, and he will do so if he possibly can."

"He won't get away from me, Carter."

"I hope not."

Payne Marshall of course returned to the Owen place after he had done the errands set for him, and as soon as all the formalities had been complied with in regard to the death of the strangler, and the body had been removed, the detective turned to his friend.

"Now, Payne," he said, "we've got a job ahead of us, but it won't take long."

"What is it?"

"I'm going to make a thorough search of that house from top to bottom."

"Good! I'm in with you on that."

"I thought you would be."

"But first, I've got something to tell you."

"What is it?"

"When I came back here with the doctor I closed and locked the gate behind me—and I have the key in my possession now."

"Certainly; and I suppose you are about to tell me that when you went out, to go after the coroner, you found it unlocked; is that it?"

"I found it wide open."

"I suspected as much."

"Why?"

"Because I am satisfied that those Hindus intended from the first to take away the body of Percy Owen, dead or alive."

"Tell me just what you mean, Nick."

"You remember what I have told you already?"

"Certainly."

"Very well; when they stole Owen away from the place where I left him when I went to the gate to send you for the doctor, they merely concealed him in another part of that wonderful grove, believing that I would be unable to find him. In the meantime they sent for

losed hack, probably, to take him away; but they had to hide him away from me until the hack arrived."

"I see."

"Now, the hack happened to arrive at just about the time you and the doctor came. If you will strain your memory I think you will recall seeing one somewhere on the road when you rode in here."

"Yes, we did pass one below here, but it was going——"

"Never mind where it was going; it was their conveyance, without a doubt."

"But how did they get poor Owen out of that grove without being discovered? You were not away from him five minutes."

"Five minutes is a long time, Payne—and there are two entrances to that grove; the other is exactly opposite this one, and therefore that much nearer the gate.

"Now, don't you see," continued Nick, "that the moment you called, and I came out here to meet you, they were ready to act? They were probably out at the other entrance before the doctor, who walked very slowly, reached this one. The grove screened them from view, and you were the only person who could have seen them, anyhow; but your attention was taken up with the horses."

"That is true."

"They took chances, but they had to do it in order to carry out their purpose; but the point is that they had a good ten minutes in which to accomplish it, even without the interruption of the attack upon you."

"I see."

"When I rushed out here after discovering that Owen had been spirited away again, it was my intention to take straight for the gate, and if I had been able to do that, I should probably have caught up with them. As it happened, I was differently occupied."

"I should say you were."

"The attack upon you took precedence of everything else, of course—and so you see, the maharajah, with——"

"The what?"

"I forgot that you do not know about that; but I'll tell you the story later. The point is that the main guy of this Hindu push was on hand and ready for work, and that he had all the time he wanted to get away with the goods."

"You have expressed that so classically that I think I quite understand you. Do you believe that the main guy, as you call him, set those two fellows onto me?"

"He may, or he may not have done so. My opinion is that the maharajah has brought along with him to this country a whole lot of helpers. Their lives are no more to him than the life of a fly is to you. He may have told them to attack you in order that you might not see him getting away with Owen, and to divert my attention as well, if I should come out of the grove; or, it may have been an accident."

"An accident? How could that be? It didn't seem to me to be much like an accident."

"Payne, a strangler is, as I have told you, a sort of human reptile. With his cord in his hand and his body greased, he can no more resist killing, if he has the chance, than a rattlesnake can resist striking if you get within its reach."

"Humph! They must be pleasant company—those fellows."

"I knew that there was one around the place. He attacked me in the dark, while I was in the house after the key of the gate, and he almost got me, too. I would have warned you about him when I left you with the horses, but I supposed, if I thought about it at all, that you were sufficiently alert so that he could not approach you in broad daylight."

"Do you suppose there are any more of them around here now?"

"No; I think the coast is entirely clear."

"And Percy Owen, Nick? Do you think he is dead?"

"No; I have thought it over since he disappeared the second time, and I have made up my mind that they somehow bound up his wound before they moved him at all, and while I was in the house after the key and down at the gate with you. He was very weak when I returned, but he had not bled any more. Some of those Hindus are wonderful surgeons, Payne."

"Then you intend to search for him?"

"I intend to find him, or at least to satisfy myself what has become of him."

"Good! And I'll help you, Nick, if you will let me."

"Certainly."

"But where in the world will you look for him?"

"I may perhaps answer that question after I have had an interview with the fellow with the wounded knee."

"Do you think you can make him talk?"

"I imagine so; but we will see. Those fellows are no more afraid of death than a samauri; but there are some things of which they stand in terror, and I happen to know a few of them. Come, now. We will go into the house. Where did you put those lanterns I told you to send back in the carriage?"

"Over there in the grass."

"Well, get them, and we'll begin our search."

Five minutes later the two men entered the house together by the same door Nick had used at the time when he was attacked by the strangler.

CHAPTER VII.

FOUR IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ON THE CASE.

There was no incident connected with the search of the Owen mansion which need be recorded here, save to note two facts.

The first one is that Nick Carter was satisfied that the mansion had been used by the men from India as a sort of headquarters for a long time, and that while they had made free with everything that the house contained, it did not appear that anything had been carried away. There had been no looting.

The other—every room in the house afforded mute evidence that a steady and systematic search for something had been going on within the walls of the mansion for a long time.

The upholstered furniture had been thoroughly examined by a species of prodding which the detective instantly recognized; the wainscoting in the dining room had been removed and replaced in several places; carpets, now old and moldy, had been loosened at the edges in order that search might be made under them; the cellar floor had been torn up and extensive excavating had gone on there; and, in short, there was apparently not a spot or place throughout the mansion which had not been thoroughly gone over in this mysterious search.

Whether that search had been fruitless or not, Nick Carter had no means of determining, but that it had been made indefatigably and determinedly, and had been going on for a considerable time, he was positive.

He recalled the short conversation he had had with Percy Owen, and now he put two and two together and came to the conclusion that old Gilbert Owen had concealed a treasure of some sort somewhere about the place, and that only his son Percy knew its hiding place.

It was doubtless to secure that treasure that Percy Owen, accompanied by his wife only, had visited the long-deserted house in the dead of night.

The theory carried with it the idea that during his captivity in India, Percy had said something about this treasure; perhaps he had offered it to the maharajah as a ransom for himself and wife; and this treasure, whatever it might be, the old maharajah and his son had determined to possess themselves of.

But it was evident to Nick now that the Hindus had left the mansion for good—that they had no idea of returning there.

When the detective and Marshall at last left the old place and mounted their horses, the day had begun to wane, and night was almost at hand. Neither of them had had a bite to eat since before sunrise that morning, and they were almost famished, and therefore there was very little said between them during the ride to Payne Marshall's house, which was only a few miles distant.

But when they had eaten dinner and adjourned to the wide veranda to enjoy their cigars the detective referred to a former conversation between them, which has not yet been recorded here, but which was the real incentive for that early morning ride which had resulted in such a remarkable series of adventures.

In order that the reader may thoroughly understand, a short preliminary explanation is necessary.

Payne Marshall and Percy Owen had been inseparable companions during their early boyhood, but a quarrel between their fathers had kept them apart later.

Their friendship had never lagged, however, and even after Percy was sent abroad to complete his studies, an occasional letter passed between them during the first year. Then the correspondence ceased.

Old Gilbert Owen died soon after his son went away, and when search was made for Percy Owen, it was found that he had mysteriously disappeared.

Since that disappearance four years had elapsed, and as nothing whatever had been heard from his son or of him, it was generally accepted that he was dead. Some effort had been made by the collateral heirs to have the estate administered, but Gilbert Owen's lawyers had succeeded in keeping it intact up to the present time.

And now we come to the reason for the early morning ride of the detective, accompanied by Payne Marshall.

Two days before the time of the opening of this story Marshall received a letter postmarked at Lunghpor, India. It was written in the style of a professional letter writer and was therefore instigated by one who could not write himself; and the letter contained these words:

"If you would find the secret of your dead friend Percy Owen, search in the cellar of his father's mansion."

That was all the letter contained, and yet it had come to Payne Marshall all the way from India.

He had puzzled over the letter for twenty-four hours and then had taken it to his friend, Nick Carter.

Nick had questioned him about the Owen family, the eccentric old man who was Percy's father, and about Percy himself.

After that they had discussed the mansion itself, closed tightly now, for four years or more, and he had learned much—enough at least so that he considered it worth while to make a search of the cellar, as the note from India directed.

"It is possible," the detective said at the time, "that the secret we are to discover is the body of your friend, and that this note was dictated to the letter writer by the murderer, who takes this method of making some atonement. But we must go there secretly."

"The walls around the grounds are high, and are covered with broken glass and spikes," Marshall told him. "The great gate at the entrance is fastened with a lock, there are four watchmen around the outside of the place

wo during the day and two at night, and the house itself must be almost impregnable."

"Nevertheless," smiled Nick, "we will find a way to get in."

"How?"

"I will go out to your home with you to-night and we will ride over to the Owen place at daylight in the morning and have a look at it."

This program was carried out as the reader knows; but when they had dismounted and Nick had drawn near to the great gate to examine the lock, he stopped suddenly, for his keen eyes detected the signs of footmarks on the hard road.

"There have been several persons here before us, Payne," he said, "and they went through the gate, too, so they must have possessed a key."

"How do you know that?" asked Marshall.

"Because I can see marks of their shoes on the roadway. They were here since sundown last night, too—that is to say, since the heaviest part of the night dew fell. That is how I can determine the footprints at all. In another hour they will have disappeared altogether. Wait. Stand back a moment and let me study them."

It was after that long and careful study of the footprints that the detective had risen from his stooping posture against the gate and remarked, quietly:

"Five went in, but only four came out."

We are already well aware of all that happened after that moment, and of what a busy day the two men had; and now they were seated calmly on the veranda of Marshall's home, smoking their after-dinner cigars.

"Nick," said Marshall, after a pause, "I wish you would tell me about your interview with Percy."

The detective complied, relating almost word for word the conversation that had taken place between them.

When the recital was finished, Marshall was silent for a long time. Then he remarked:

"What I don't understand about the affair is, why there should have been any duel at all. If the maharajah chased Percy all the way here to kill him, why didn't he do it?"

"That is one of the things that remain to be explained," replied Nick.

"And, if they intended to give him a chance for his life, why was he stabbed in the back?"

"That is in the same category as your other question."

"And, if the duel was fought in that glade in the grove, how came the bloodstains on the piazza?"

"I have pondered over that a good deal myself," said Nick, slowly, "and I think I can answer it; moreover, I should not be surprised if the answer to your last question supplied a very plausible one for the second question you asked."

"What is your theory of it, Nick?"

"This: I think that Percy Owen wounded his antagonist, who was his wife's brother—the son of the old maharajah. If that is true, he must have been severely wounded, for he certainly bled freely enough. If that is so, he was carried from the grove to the piazza, and placed there long enough for some sort of a stretcher to be improvised to carry him to the carriage, or perhaps for the old man to dress his wound—for I am satisfied that he is a skilled surgeon."

"Don't forget that four people came out of the gate. If one of the five who went in was on a stretcher——"

"It would take two to carry it out, wouldn't it?"

"Sure."

"And we know that there were other Hindus in the house."

"I see the point; yes, that's all right. But tell me now how all that applies to my second question—the one about the stabbing in the back?"

"Well, I think it very possible that the old man, when he saw his son wounded and perhaps killed, might have done it himself in the anger of the moment, and that may be the reason why Owen would not tell me who did it."

"That is very likely."

"And again, the servant might have done it. When he saw his young master fall, he might have thrown his knife. Those fellows are all expert at that. One of those two things is what happened; you can depend upon that."

"That takes me back to my first question; have you any theory about that?"

"No; at least, not any that is worth mentioning."

"But you have some explanation in your mind?"

"I couldn't call it either an explanation or a theory."

"Tell me what it is, anyhow."

"My idea is that in some manner Percy Owen's wife interfered in the plans and designs of her father and brother."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Marshall, starting to his feet, "that fact might give us an answer to the fourth question I was about to ask."

"What was that?"

"I was going to ask what on earth could have persuaded Percy's wife to go away calmly after what happened there, if she loved her husband at all; but Nick, I think, I see it all now. I do, really."

Nick Carter smiled.

"Very well," he said, "let us have your idea."

"Why, it's only guesswork, to be sure, but it's worth a thought."

"Certainly; let's have it."

"Well, when she found that they were overtaken by her father and brother, and that they intended to kill Percy, she probably made terms with them by threatening to kill herself, if they did so—or something like that. Perhaps she suggested the duel herself, agreeing to abide by

the consequences of it. Perhaps—oh, dash it all, I'm no good at theorizing, but I'll bet a hat that she didn't go away willingly."

"So will I," replied Nick, quietly.

Again there was a long silence between them.

"What are you going to do next?" asked Marshall, presently.

"I'm going to throw away the stub of this cigar first, and ——"

"Have a fresh one?"

"No; and ask you to have a horse put into the trap and drive me over to Dr. Whitehall's."

"To see the Hindu?"

"Yes."

"I'm your man. Shall we start at once?"

"As soon as you are ready."

"Do you think you can make him talk, Nick?"

"I think so," replied the detective, quietly. "I can at least try."

CHAPTER VIII.

NADJA, THE BEAUTIFUL.

A short drive brought them to the doctor's house, and as they pulled up at the door, they encountered the huge figure of the physician almost at the doorstep.

"Hello, young men!" he said, cordially. "Did you just come?"

"Just this moment," replied Nick.

"Want to see that heathen, I suppose; eh?"

"Yes."

"I've got him safely housed in a room upstairs; locked in, and with my coachman and my gardener on the watch outside the door, just as you suggested. I was called out myself an hour or more ago—hurry call, you know—but nothing the matter—only scared. Lord! but there are lots of people who would die of fright if it weren't for us doctors."

"Family gone away?" asked Marshall, as they ascended the steps to the front door.

"Yes. Wife and daughter at Nantucket; Bob's in Europe and the old man has to run things alone. Come in, Mr. Carter. Come in, Payne. Just half a minute now, while I make an entry in my book, and then I'll take you up to see your captive."

"What do you think of him, doctor?" asked Nick.

"H'm! I don't know. Wonderful fellows, those Hindus. Never peeped, never quivered an eyelash when I was fixing up his knee; must have hurt him dreadfully, too. There. Now, I'm ready. Come along."

He led the way to the stairs and they mounted to the second floor; but at the foot of the second flight of stairs, the doctor paused.

"That's funny," he said.

"What is?" asked Nick, who was next behind him.

"Why, I left a light in that upper hall, and the coachman and the gardener were sitting in the hall on the watch. I told them they could smoke if they wanted to just to——"

"I think I know the rest, doctor," said Nick Carter, calmly. "I don't think we need go any farther to see our captive, for he will not be there; but, it is more than likely that you may find a pair of corpses there."

"Good Heaven, man! What do you mean? That my two men have been killed?"

"Wait," said Nick. "Let me go ahead. I will see."

He ran up the stairs three at a time, and at the top, struck a match and lighted the gas jet.

The hallway was perfectly clear save for the presence of the two chairs where the doctor's servants had been seated while they were on the watch.

"Come along, doctor," he called. "Which room was our man in?"

"The front one on the left."

Nick threw the door open and entered the room; in another instant he had lighted the gas to discover the two men, the coachman and the gardener, tightly bound and thoroughly gagged, stretched at full length on the floor.

"What do you think of that, doctor?" he asked, pointing toward the men.

"I think, Mr. Carter," replied the doctor, slowly and solemnly, "that I've had more new experiences to-day than in all the rest of my life put together; and I'm sixty years old."

Nick laughed as he set about freeing the captive men from their bonds.

"I'm sorry about that fellow's escaping, Carter," said the doctor, apologetically.

"Don't worry, doctor. It's unfortunate, of course, but it can't be helped, and it was not at all your fault."

"Thank you, Carter, for taking it so kindly."

"Forget it, doctor, and let us see what these fellows can tell us. Now, my man, you're the gardener, I take it."

"Yes, sir."

"What can you tell us about all this business?"

"Faith, sir, it's mighty little I'll be afther tellin' you for it's dommed little that I know about it, but if you be askin' Jimmy, there, he knows more about it than I do I'm thinkin'."

"All right. Jimmy, what do you know about the affair?"

"Well, sir, the doctor hadn't been gone ten minutes when the doorbell rang, and I went down to answer it."

"Well?"

"There was a mighty pleasant-spoken old gentleman on the porch, and he says, 'Is the doctor in?' 'He's not,' says I. 'When will he be?' says he. 'In an hour,' says I. 'All right,' says he, 'I'll come in and wait.'"

"So you admitted him, I suppose."

"I did, sir."

"Where did you take him?"

"To the waiting room of the office, sir, of course."

"And then, in about ten minutes, there was another call at the door, I suppose."

"There was, sir."

"And this caller also decided to wait."

"He did, sir."

"And presently a third one came, eh?"

"True for you, sir, though how the devil——"

"Never mind that. How many were there in all?"

"Four, sir."

"And you had them all waiting for the doctor at once, eh?"

"Sure I did."

"Well, what happened after that?"

"After a little the bell rang again——"

"I thought you said there were only four."

"Wait, sir, I'm telling you the best I can."

"Well, go on."

"The bell rang again and I went down, but before I could get to the door somebody threw something—a blanket, I think it was—over my head, and then I was picked up and carried into the parlor."

"And then?"

"And then a voice says to me, 'If you utter a sound without my permission, you will die that instant.'"

"So you kept still, I suppose."

"You bet your life I did, sir."

"Well, what next?"

"Next they tied me up the way you found me, sir, barrin' the gag. They wern't ready for that yet."

"They wished you to call the gardener downstairs for them, I suppose."

"That is just what they did make me do, sir, and with a knife at me throat at that. When I tried to call first, I couldn't make a sound to save me life, but I finally found the voice enough to make him hear."

"I suppose they captured him in precisely the same way?"

"Sure they did. And then they carried us upstairs and put the gags in our mouths. And then they took his nibs that we'd been watching, from the bed, and carried him down the stairs; and that's all I know about it till you came."

"Doctor," said Nick, turning to the physician, "I think it is perhaps fortunate that you were called out to-night."

"Why?"

"Because they meant to get that man away from us, and they would have done it, even if they had been compelled to commit murder. If you had been here, they might have been obliged to kill you in order to carry out their purpose, and I assure you they would not have hesitated."

"I hope, sir," said the coachman to Nick, "that you don't think I'm too much at fault."

"You are not to be blamed at all, James. According to what you know, you did perfectly right. It was your place to admit patients for the doctor. No, my man, it was not your fault. If there is any fault anywhere, it lies with me. I should have asked the doctor to take the fellow directly to the jail—but I hardly think that even that would have held him, under the circumstances."

"Payne," said the detective, when a few moments later they left the doctor, "if you will just drive me to the station instead of back to your house, I think I'll get back to New York to-night. You can send my grip down by your man, some day."

"You're not going to drop the case, are you, Nick?"

"Drop it? I should say not."

"I thought you were going to let me assist you."

"So I am."

"Well, then, why not wait till morning? We can take an early train down."

"No, Payne. I'll go down to-night. I can be in my own house by ten o'clock."

"You'll be there before that. You ought to make it by nine-thirty."

"All the better. Shall I look for you down in the morning?"

"Yes; bright and early."

"Which means, in your language, about ten o'clock, I suppose."

"Somewhere about that time, yes."

Payne Marshall proved to be a good prophet, for it was, exactly half-past nine when Nick Carter stepped through the front door of his own house.

His man, Joseph, whose room was at the back end of the hall, came forward to receive him.

"There's a lady waiting to see you, sir," he said, in a low tone.

"A lady?" asked Nick, surprised at Joseph's manner.

"Yes, sir. Will you step back this way a moment, sir, and let me tell you about it?"

Still more surprised, Nick followed Joseph into his own little room, where that worthy carefully closed the door before he uttered a word.

"I think she's crazy, sir," he said, then, "although I haven't seen anything out of the way about her actions."

"Then why do you think she is crazy?"

"She's been here all day, sir, waiting for you; since early this morning."

"I don't see anything especially crazy about that, Joseph. I hope you have seen to it that she has wanted for nothing."

"Certainly, sir. I gave her luncheon, and dinner, the same as if you were at home, and I carried her in a cup of tea and some cakes soon after she arrived this morning.

I think she is foreign, sir. She has the quaintest way of speaking that you ever heard."

"But what in the name of wonder makes you think she is crazy?"

"It is what she said when she came, this morning, sir."

"What was that?"

"She asked for you, of course, and when I told her that you had gone away the night before, she seemed greatly distressed."

"Well?"

"She asked me when you would return, and I told her I did not know, although I rather expected you some time to-day; but for all that, that you might be gone a week. I never could tell."

"Quite right, Joseph."

"Then she asked if she might come in and wait; and, sir, knowing that you were not likely to come home very soon, and that Mr. Chick and Mr. Patsy and Mr. Ten-Ichi were all out of town, I hadn't the heart to keep her waiting in the reception room, so I showed her into the library."

"Right again, Joseph. You're all right."

"After she had been there about an hour, I took the tea and cakes to her, and then she asked me if there was a lady or a woman in the house."

"Did she put it that way, Joseph?" asked the detective, quickly. "Did she say a lady or a woman?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Go on."

"I told her there was the housekeeper and the cook; and then she asked if she might see the housekeeper."

Nick chuckled audibly.

"She was up against it, wasn't she, Joseph?"

"Yes, sir. I told her that the housekeeper had gone on her vacation, but was expected home about midnight to-night; and again she seemed greatly distressed. Then she asked me if I was your man."

"That doesn't sound very mad, does it, Joseph?"

"No, sir, not yet. Wait."

"I'm waiting, and with a greater exercise of patience than you imagine."

"Well, sir, here is the point. She said to me then—and I can repeat her exact words."

"Do so."

"She said: 'I wish to see Mr. Carter on very important business. It is a matter of life and death, of honor and happiness. I have no place to go—no place where I dare go until I have seen him, and I wish to wait here, in this house, till he returns, whether it is to-day, to-morrow, or a week or a month hence. I wish to remain here. If I go out from here——' she stopped and shuddered; and then she went on again: 'If I go out from here, it will be to my death, or to what will be a thousand times worse than death. Will you let me stay?'"

"What answer did you make, Joseph?"

"What answer could I make, sir?"

"Only one, my good fellow; only one."

"She is here now. She is in the library. I have made her as comfortable as I could."

"That's right. What sort of a looking woman is she, Joseph?"

"Mr. Carter, if an angel should come right down out of heaven, that angel couldn't be half so beautiful as this woman; only——"

"Only what?"

"We generally think of angels with yellow hair and eyes like the sky. The young woman in the library is dark. Her hair is black, and her eyes are great, round stars of—of—well, sir, if a diamond could be big and lustrous and soft, and yet as black as night, it might about give the idea I have in mind."

"Joseph, Joseph, I am surprised. I didn't suppose you had it in you."

"Nor I, sir, till I saw her. I had no idea that a woman could be so beautiful. Really, sir, I mean it."

"And yet you thought her crazy."

"What else could I think, under the circumstances, with her wanting to stay here and wait for you, even if it took a month."

"Lots else. Did she tell you her name?"

"No, sir."

"How old a woman is she, do you think?"

"Why, she cannot be more than twenty, sir."

"So young! Look here, Joseph, this young woman evidently meant what she said, and it is more than likely that we will have to keep her here, at least to-night. Now, if the housekeeper should happen not to get home to-night——"

"I have already attended to that, sir."

"You have?"

"Yes, sir. I sent a messenger boy to my brother's widow, who lives in Harlem, as you know, and she sent back word that she would be here at half-past ten."

"Joseph, you are a jewel of priceless worth. Not one man in ten thousand would have had an idea of that kind."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now go into the library, and tell your visitor that I have arrived, and that I will be with her in ten minutes."

While Joseph went to carry out his master's order Nick ran up the stairs to his room

Ten minutes later he entered the library—and paused just inside the doorway, astounded.

He had taken Joseph's description of his guest's beauty with a grain or two of salt, but he saw in that instant, that far from overdoing the matter, Joseph had not half done justice to her beauty.

She rose as he entered, and advanced a step toward him.

"Are you Mr. Nicholas Carter?" she asked, with an indescribable accent, and in a voice like the softest of chimes.

"Yes," replied Nick, "I am Mr. Carter. And you——?"

"I am Nadja, daughter of the Maharajah of Pootjahr, in India, but the wife of an American, and I have come to you, sir, in the greatest distress. Will you help me, sir? Don't refuse; for your God's sake, don't refuse."

CHAPTER IX.

THE UNACCOUNTABLE CROOK.

The genuine distress in the face and manner of the young and beautiful woman who had announced herself as Nadja, daughter of the Maharajah of Pootjahr, in India, was pathetic—almost pitiful, and yet Nick Carter could with difficulty conceal the delight he experienced at the encounter, for of course he instantly realized that he was face to face with the wife of Percy Owen.

He smiled reassuringly upon her, and taking her by the hand—she had extended both toward him in her appeal—he led her gently back to the chair in which she had been seated when he entered the room.

"Most certainly I will help you," he said, in that inimitable tone which always carried confidence with it.

"And protect me also?" she added, wistfully. "I am in grave peril, sir."

"Yes; and protect you, also. You need have no fears from this moment. Put aside your terrors. Be brave. Be confident, and let us talk the matter over calmly."

The sigh of content which she uttered as she sank back into the chair, seemed to come from the depths of her soul; but she had scarcely relaxed when of a sudden she sat erect again, and with a frightened shudder, said quickly:

"I don't know if I am correct, but I fear—I fear that I may have been followed when I came here this morning. I have not dared to leave the——"

"My dear madam," interrupted the detective, "did I not tell you to be confident, to forget your terrors and that I could protect you. If you were followed by a dozen different persons, you may nevertheless feel quite safe inside this house, and you need not leave it until you can feel safe outside it as well."

"Ah, how good you are!" she murmured.

"Now tell me," said Nick, drawing a chair up so that he sat facing her, "how it happens that you came to me, how you knew about me at all, and how you knew where to find me."

"I have a long story to tell you, sir, and there is much which should go before the answer to your questions. I fear that you will misunderstand me if I reply directly."

"I can promise you that I will not misunderstand you," replied Nick, "and I would prefer that you reply to my questions."

For a moment she seemed to hesitate, as if she were uncertain how to frame her reply; and then she said:

"During the very early hours of this morning, while it was yet dark, I found myself surrounded by unforeseen perils. I will describe them to you later. I felt the necessity of escaping. It was three o'clock when I arrived in the city from a journey to the suburbs."

"Three o'clock this morning."

"Yes."

"Very well."

"I scarcely know how I escaped from my tormentors, sir. We got down from the carriage in which we were driven, at the door of a hotel. I was, and had been for hours, in a state of lethargic terror so that I suppose my companions thought me benumbed. For a moment their eyes were off me; they were engaged in attending to a member of the party who had been severely injured. Near me was a common hack. The driver stood near the open door. I had money in my possession—plenty of it. It was in this chatelaine bag. I detached one of the bills—it was what you call a hundred dollars, I think—ran lightly and quickly to the open hack, pressed the bill into the driver's hand as I passed him, and leaped inside.

"'Drive! Drive anywhere, but quickly! Only escape from them!' I said to him.

"In an instant more, Mr. Carter, we were dashing through the streets at terrific speed. We turned corner after corner, going, it seemed to me, in every direction, until after a time we began to travel much more slowly. At last we came to a stop, the driver got down, came to the door and opened it."

"You might, at that moment, have been in much more danger than that from which you fled," said Nick.

"Yes, sir. I felt it at that moment for the first time; and I must have shown it in my face, for in the kindest tone possible, the man said to me:

"'Have no fear, madam. I am not an honest man, but I do not prey upon women.'

"By Jove!" exclaimed Nick. "You were fortunate indeed! You fell into the hands of 'The Unaccountable Crook.'"

"Yes; that was the name he told me to give to you. I was to tell you that 'The Unaccountable Crook' sent me to you."

"So he is back again," mused the detective, aloud. "It is a long time since I have heard of him at all, and I supposed him dead, or that he had quit the business. He is a strange character, madam—an unaccountable character. But I won't interrupt you now. Did you tell him your story?"

"In part, only. I told him as much as I have told you, I think; no more, save that I felt the necessity of placing myself under the protection of some powerful official—some one who was an honorable man, and I begged him to take me to such a one if he could.

"His dress was shabby, Mr. Carter, and he looked rough and uncouth, but he had wonderful eyes, and his manner was gentle and deferential. Somehow, I trusted him.

"The first thing he did was to give me back the bill I had thrust into his hand, with the remark:

"'When I serve a good woman, I find my recompense in the pleasure it gives me.'

"Then he told me about you. It was much too early in the morning for me to come here at that time, so he drove me slowly about the city while I slept in the hack.

"That is all, sir. And now, will you listen to the rest of my story? To that part of it which precedes all that I have told you?"

"I think," said Nick, smiling kindly upon her, "that you are much too fatigued to relate it to-night; and besides, I am already familiar with much of it."

"Already acquainted with my story?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, Madam Owen——"

"You know my name!"

She leaped to her feet in consternation.

"Be seated, please," said Nick, quietly, "and listen to me patiently."

"Yes, sir; yes."

"You are the wife of Percy Owen. I was at the Owen place early this morning not many hours after you left there accompanied by your father, your wounded brother, and two of your father's servants."

She was staring at the detective in wide-eyed wonder.

"Let me set your mind at rest on one point," continued the detective, "Your husband is alive, I honestly believe. I found him in the grove where the duel was fought. He told me something of his history and yours. Later, he was stolen away while I was temporarily absent, and now he is in the power of your father."

"Then he is already dead," she murmured, in a tone so sad that tears would have been a travesty.

"No; I think not," said Nick. "And now, I think the woman who will act as your maid and companion for the present, has arrived. You are very tired, and I think you should retire. To-morrow you can send her out for such articles as you require to make yourself comfortable; and in the morning we will discuss this matter thoroughly."

"No, no, no!" she exclaimed. "Please, please let us discuss it now. Afterward I will sleep. But now, oh, I could not."

"Very well," said the detective, resignedly.

"Pray tell me how it is that you know all the things you do."

"Merely because business took me to the vicinity of the old mansion in company with an old friend of your husband. I found that people had been inside the grounds, and that five had gone in while only four came out—or so it seemed. I searched for the fifth one in the party and found him. You see it is all very simple."

"Yes," she murmured, only half convinced.

"Now tell me," continued the detective, "why you went to that old house in the dead of night."

"To secure possession of a treasure which my husband's father concealed there for him," she replied, simply.

"You had no idea that your father and brother were already in the city, and that every step you took was watched?"

"None."

"When were you first apprised of their presence?"

"As we approached the mansion. They sprang out upon us, and my husband was a prisoner before he had an opportunity to resist. They would have killed him then and there, only——"

"Only that you somehow prevented it?"

"I told my father that I would take my own life if they took his."

"And then——?"

"My brother sprang forward and would have stabbed Percy, but that I called him coward. He hesitated, then."

"Who suggested the duel?"

"Percy. He told where there were rapiers inside the house. He offered to fight with my brother, with them in the grove; and he commanded me, if he should fall, to return to India with my father. Ah, sir, it was terrible, that combat of theirs in the center of that strange jungle, with only lanterns for light. I was fainting with terror at the sight of it when my father gave me a pellet and said that it would make me stronger. I swallowed it, and after that I knew no more until we were in the carriage. That is, what occurred after that is not distinct. I remained upon my feet, but I know very little of what happened. I saw my brother fall, and then I saw Percy fall also, but I seemed not to care. It was one of my father's strange drugs that he gave me. I should not have taken it.

"When I escaped from them early this morning, I knew only that my brother was severely wounded, but I did not know about the fate of my husband. They assured me that he was dead, but I did not believe them; I could not. I feel in my heart that he lives, and that I shall see him again."

"You will," said Nick, smiling reassuringly. "How many men were there in the grove, when the duel was fought?"

"Six. My father, my brother, my father's attendant Simhra, and two others who came here to serve my father."

"That is only five."

"I forgot my brother's attendant. He returned to the city with us."

"Madam Owen," said Nick, "you might have gone about the city without fear to-day, for I am sure that your father and both the servants were out there at the mansion throughout the entire day."

"Ah, no," she replied. "There are at least a dozen others in my father's retinue. Possibly more; I do not know."

"Why does your father hate you so?"

"My father loves me; but he loves his religion and the purity of his blood better than aught else. It is Percy he hates, because I love him and am wedded to him. In wedding myself to a foreigner, I committed, in his eyes, the most terrible crime. We were married in an English chapel, in India. We fled to the seacoast, but were overtaken. Percy was imprisoned. He told you that, did he not?"

"Yes. Why was he not killed at once?"

"Because in killing him, my father would have killed me also. I swore it."

"And ultimately you succeeded in liberating your husband, and escaping to America."

"Yes. My father was away in the mountains. I drugged my brother and then succeeded in liberating Percy. We disguised ourselves and crossed the mountains instead of endeavoring to escape to the coast."

"Now, tell me, have you any idea of the location of the house to which your wounded brother was taken, this morning?"

"None whatever."

"If I assure you that your husband shall be restored to you if he is alive, will you retire now and seek the rest you so sorely need?"

"Yes."

"Then go; and be assured that if your husband lives—and I believe he is alive—I will find him and bring him to you here. And in the meantime, you shall be safe from harm."

"I would rather die, Mr. Carter, than be taken back to India without him."

"You shall not be, if I can prevent it—and I think I can."

CHAPTER X.

THE DETECTIVE'S WORST WORRY.

Payne Marshall arrived promptly at the detective's house on the following morning and was duly informed about the unexpected guest whom Nick was entertaining.

But the strain under which Nadja had struggled rendered her incapable of leaving her room that day, and in fact for many a day thereafter; but the housekeeper returned, a special maid was procured by Nick to wait upon her, and she was made in every way, as comfortable as she might have been elsewhere.

One bit of information which the detective sought from her this morning, was the name of the hotel to which she had gone with her husband on their arrival in the city; and later, Nick sought the proprietor, and arranged that their belongings should be well cared for, as well as that all inquiries concerning them, should be met with the reply that they had gone away.

After that, he felt that he had a free hand to work as he pleased.

He believed that even an Indian rajah would not be averse to adding to the treasures he already possessed, and it was upon this hypothesis that he placed his belief that Percy Owen still lived.

He felt assured in his own mind that the men employed by the rajah had not discovered the treasure of old Gilbert Owen, and therefore he would keep Percy alive, although a prisoner, in the hope of worming from him, by torture, perhaps, the secret of its hiding place.

He had never before in all his experience, so greatly missed his assistants as now.

It happened that all three of them were away, and he was, therefore, compelled to work alone, save for the assistance which Marshall could give, which was, of course, not of the decided expert character he wanted.

Nevertheless, he never for a moment left his house unguarded.

Although he believed that the old maharajah had no idea of the hiding place of his daughter, there was always the possibility that he might in some way discover it, and Nick knew that if once the knowledge came into the possession of the old man, he would stop at nothing to get her again in his power. Indeed, he had given ample proof of that by his adeptness in stealing away the wounded knife thrower from the house of Doctor Whitehall.

But if the maharajah could obtain no trace of his daughter, neither could the detective discover any trace of him.

In applying at the detective bureau for two men to watch his house while Nadja was a guest there, he had also secured the services of two more to watch the old mansion of the Owens.

But nothing came of it; not one of the Hindus ever went near it after that memorable day, and when a week went by, and then another, without the slightest trace of any of the people he sought being obtained, he began to wonder if the maharajah had not given up the game, put Percy Owen quietly out of the way, and returned to his own country.

But he dismissed that idea almost as soon as it formed, as being untenable.

He was well aware of the tenaciousness of the Hindu, and how loth he is ever to give up a quest once engaged upon.

"If I could only have an interview with that 'Unaccountable Crook,'" he remarked, one day, to Marshall, when they were discussing the case.

"Who is he?" asked Marshall. "Never heard of him."

"Few have heard of him. He is a strange character. I know his work—they know his work down at headquarters, but none of us has ever seen him to know him."

"But why 'Unaccountable'?"

"Because of the odd things he does. He can perform any miracle of crookdom, from picking a pocket to opening a safe by placing one ear against the dial of the combination, and do it all so well that he has never been caught—not even seen; but he never takes an article that belongs to a woman, and he is eternally doing chivalrous acts in their behalf—like that service he rendered Nadja—and telling them to attribute what he does, to 'The Unaccountable Crook.' He gave himself the name, so far as I know."

During all this time, Nadja was pathetically patient and hopeful.

Each morning when Nick Carter went out, she smiled at him hopefully, and each time he returned, her great, matchless eyes sought his in mute inquiry.

It was three weeks to a day since the events at the Owen mansion, when just as night was falling, the detective, accompanied by Marshall, was walking through the street toward Nick's house.

"Payne," said Nick, "you can put this case down as my worst worry. I never was so nonplused in my life; and yet the strange part of it is that there is not a feature about it which should not admit of a ready resolution, so far as appearances go."

They had arrived at the steps and were about to ascend them, when a street gamin ran up to the detective.

"Are you Nick Carter?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Nick.

"Well, I've got suthin' fur you. Here 'tis;" and he extended a neatly folded note in a grimy palm.

The detective unfolded the note and read:

"If you will receive 'The Unaccountable Crook' in the dark, at your house, one hour from now, and will tell this lad that you will make no effort to see the crook's face or to detain him, he will call upon you. Just tell the boy 'yes' if it's a go."

Nick turned to the little fellow, who was waiting.

"Tell the man who sent you to me that I say, YES," he said, "and here is a dol——"

But the boy was already running up the street.

"I gits my pay at the other end, mister," he called back.

An hour later Nick Carter extinguished the light in the lower hall of his house, opened wide the door, and then retreated into his own reception room where he waited in the dark.

And he had not long to wait.

Scarcely three minutes elapsed before he heard a quick step outside the door, and a tall man, with his face muffled to the eyes, entering the hall.

"Mr. Carter," he said, aloud.

"This way," replied Nick. "You may select the darkest corner of the room."

"Thank you. There aren't many men for whom I would do this, Carter."

"I suppose not; but I am very——"

"Never mind gratitude, if you please. You're square, and I know it; but I have come on the young woman's account; not on yours."

"I already appreciate that fact."

"I've been doing a little detective work myself, since that morning I sent her here."

"I'm glad of that."

"You can tell her, from me, that her husband is alive and almost well. His wound was not a bad one; it was loss of blood which made the danger."

"You know that positively?"

"If I didn't I wouldn't tell you."

"Is he in any imminent danger?"

"That depends upon what you call imminent danger. If you could see the glances of malignant hate which the old man bestows upon him at times, you'd think he wouldn't live more than five minutes longer."

"Have you succeeded in getting as close to them as that?"

"Bless you, I've been working for the old maharajah. I've been trying to find his daughter for him, and I have kept him hoping that I would succeed until now; but to-night he told me that unless I discovered her within the next twenty-four hours, he would give up hope, and return to India; and if he does that, Carter, he'll take young Owen with him, and he will wreak the most horrible vengeance upon him that he can devise. I speak Hindustanee, you know. I've been in India a good deal in my time. I know something about the people there. It was by addressing the old man in his own tongue that I got solid with him."

"You have been able to accomplish what I could not," said Nick. "This is the only time in my recollection when another succeeded where I could not."

"You forget that I already knew where the old man lived. I run a hack sometimes, just for sport, and I have had him for a passenger before this happened. That was

ow I happened to be in front of the door that morning hen I rescued the young woman. If I had known at the me that she was his daughter, maybe I wouldn't have ne what I did; but I have since been glad of it. He'd have taken her back to India to eat her heart out in sorrow, and I couldn't stand the thought of that.

"You see, Carter, I may as well be frank with you. I got next to the outfit first on account of some jewels the old man has in his possession; but if I get them, it will be the cleverest grab I ever made. He's a sly old fox, is the maharajah."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Because I know that you won't repeat it after what I intend to do for you."

"What do you intend to do for me?"

"I mean to tell you how to find the young lady's husband, and the whole outfit."

"And how shall I repay you for this?"

"I'll pay myself. You needn't worry about that."

"By making that clever grab you referred to?"

"Something like that."

"Is the maharajah's son alive?"

"Just about; but he'll get well."

"How many men has the old man got around him?"

"There are only four now. You killed one and maimed another, and the rest of the outfit is scouring the town high and low to find the daughter."

"And now are you prepared to tell me where I am to find Percy Owen—and the others?"

"Yes; if you are willing to trust me, and to do as I say."

"I am."

"How do you know that I'm not laying a trap for you under promise of reward from the old Hindu?"

"Because I believe, notwithstanding your avowed profession, that such an act would be beneath you."

"As indeed it would, Carter. You are right. All right, then, if you are willing to trust me, you be ready to act to-night. You can take your friend Marshall with you, but no other. The house is a swell one. It's rather dark in this room, so you can't see what I'm doing now, but I'm in the act of placing a sheet of paper on the floor beside this chair. That sheet of paper contains a diagram of the house, and its location. The black cross shows where you will be able to get inside. The circle with the cross inside shows the room where Percy Owen is confined. Whatever else you wish to know, you will have to work out for yourself."

"Oh, I'm perfectly willing to do that, as well as agree to the terms you have made."

"There's another condition, Carter."

"What is that?"

"You are not to injure the old man or his son, if it can be avoided."

"Agreed."

"And that's all. You'd better be there about two o'clock to-night. And, Carter, you need not feel bad about not being able to find the old man, for he has not been out of the house since the evening of the day his daughter disappeared, and not one of his men have been near it. They communicate with him by telephone, whenever there is occasion to do so; and you understand I already knew where to find him."

"And is there nothing that I can do for you in recognition of all this?"

"Oh, the day may come when I'll ask a favor of you; but not yet; and say, if it ever happens that you are sent on my track, don't hesitate to take it because of this affair; only, of course, I don't expect you to start out after me on your own hook. But if you strike a clew at any time which leads to me, follow it without favor."

"You are a strange man," said Nick.

"I expect I am. Stranger than you think, perhaps; but then, don't forget that I'm 'The Unaccountable Crook.'"

"I wish you'd give up the business and come here and be one of my assistants."

"I wish I could; but there are reasons why that is impossible. Thank you all the same."

"Shall I see you there at that house to-night?"

"You won't know it if you do, will you?"

"Not unless I hear you speak. I think I would know your voice."

"Do you? Well, I'll take chances on that. Good-night."

The strange man passed swiftly through the doorway and was gone.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MEANING OF "A CLEVER GRAB."

Nick Carter remained seated where he was for several minutes. Then he rose and touched the button which illuminated the chandelier. Next, he did the same for the front hall, and then he returned to the reception room

and possessed himself of the paper which "The Unaccountable Crook" had left for reference.

When he looked at it he uttered a low whistle.

The house indicated on the paper belonged to one of our well-known millionaires, and was located on Fifth Avenue, east of the park.

"No wonder that I could get no trace of him," muttered the detective, "especially as he never leaves the house and permits none of his men to visit him there."

After studying the paper for a moment, he placed it in his pocket, glanced at his watch to discover that it was not yet ten o'clock, and then went swiftly up the stairs to the door of the room occupied by Nadja.

The nurse came to the door in response to his summons, and he was told that he might enter.

"Nadja," he said to her, for she had long since requested him to make use of her given name, and she was so girl-like that it seemed only natural to do so, "I have received information to-night which makes me positive that your husband is alive, and almost recovered from his injuries. Don't question me now, please. Perhaps I will have more to tell you in the morning. Let us hope that you will see him again before—well, before very long."

He bade her good-night and went to his own den, where Payne Marshall was smoking and reading.

"Feel like a scrap to-night, Payne?" he asked.

"Anything, old man, anything," was the reply.

Then Nick related all that had occurred between him and "The Unaccountable Crook."

"Queer chap, that, Nick," said Marshall, when the story was finished. "Do you know what I think about him? I think he's a sort of crank who is in the 'crook' business just for the fun of the thing. In other words, I don't think he's a crook at all."

"Humph!" said the detective. "You are wrong about that. He's a crook all right enough. I have had more than one proof of that in the past; but I agree with you in thinking that he is something else as well. But we'll drop him now, if you please, and make our plan of campaign for to-night."

It was just two o'clock that night when the detective, accompanied by Payne Marshall, arrived at the corner whereon was located the house indicated on the plan in Nick Carter's pocket.

The cross which marked where they were to enter, was represented in the house itself by nothing more or less than the main entrance to the building, which was on the side street instead of on the avenue.

Nick approached it without hesitation, for it was one of his characteristics that he trusted a person implicitly or not at all, and he had made up his mind to put faith in "The Unaccountable Crook."

He turned the knob silently, half expecting that the door would open; but in this he was mistaken. Then he smiled and drew his pick-lock from his pocket.

"The crook knows me better than I supposed," he whispered, as he inserted it in the latchkey hole.

An instant later, the door swung silently open before them, and the two passed inside, deftly closing it after them.

"This way," whispered Nick; and he seized Marshall's arm and drew him along through the wide hall, or foyer, and up the broad stairway.

The detective had wondered why his informant had seen fit to mark only the room in which Percy Owen was confined, and had given him no clue to the one occupied by the old maharajah, and he had decided that for some purpose which he did not choose to explain, the 'crook' wished him to visit that room first; for that reason he decided to do so.

They were not long in arriving before the door indicated on the plan by a cross within a circle.

It was closed, but the detective was able to see that there were lights within the room, and after waiting a moment, he slowly turned the knob.

There was no click in the lock, no sound whatever from the door as it swung slowly ajar before the pressure the detective put upon it, and presently he was enabled, by taking a step forward, to peer inside.

The scene before him was entirely unexpected.

The room was of unusual size, and was sumptuously furnished. There was a bed in one corner, and upon this rested a dark young man, apparently asleep, whom Nick correctly judged was Nadja's brother.

Over against the wall, near the window, was a huge Turkish couch, and curled up on this, fully dressed, but also soundly sleeping, was Percy Owen.

But that was not all. There was a desk in the room, and there was a shaded light upon it and in the armchair before the desk and beneath the light, sat an old man, unmistakably the Maharajah of Pootjahr—the father of Nadja.

He was smoking. His head rested wearily upon his

cft hand while with the right he was busily engaged in writing. There was no other person in the room.

Realizing this, Nick stepped quickly inside, motioning to Marshall to follow him. Then he closed the door, purposely making sufficient noise to attract the attention of the old man.

"You, Simhra?" asked the maharajah in Hindustanee, but without turning his head.

"No," replied Nick, in the same tongue. "It is not Simhra, but another."

The old man seemed not at first to realize what was said, and then of a sudden it came over him. He raised his head, wheeled in his chair, and faced Nick Carter; and then, for a moment there was silence.

"Ah!" said the maharajah, at last. "It is you. Our friend of the grove. Do you bring me news of my daughter?" He was quite calm, and seemed not in the least surprised at the unwarranted interruption "Do you bring me news of my daughter?" he repeated.

"I have come for that young man, yonder," replied Nick, pointing toward the couch where young Owen was sleeping. They still spoke in Hindustanee, for Nick supposed that the old man did not understand English.

"He is there, as you see," said the maharajah. "You are welcome to him—if you bring me news of my daughter. I was told that shortly after the hour of two, if I would leave my door on the latch, a person would appear here who could give me news of her. Are you not that person?"

"I could give you news of her if I would," was Nick's reply. "Who told you that I would come here? How does it happen that you expected me?"

"The horoscope told me. Look! Here it is on my desk. You may examine it if you understand such things."

"Answer me truthfully," said Nick. "Did no person give you this information?"

"By my faith in the purity of the blood of my fathers, no person did tell me so," replied the old man, solemnly. "I have my information from a higher source. It is written here. I was but now working it out again, and for the hundredth time, when you came. See it for yourself."

Nick stepped forward to comply with the request, and as he did so, there was a crash behind him, and he wheeled just in time to see Payne Marshall sink to the floor beneath the onslaught of two men, while rushing toward him from the same quarter, came two more.

Instantly his hands shot out, and as instantly there appeared in each of them those trusty little revolvers which he always carried in his sleeves.

But he did not shoot. There was no need to do so.

It was the old man who acted, and he did it with the lightning-like rapidity of a youthful athlete.

He leaped from his chair and confronted his own men, standing between them and Nick Carter's pistols.

He did not speak, but he seemed to grow taller with each second of time, and the terrible wrath which gleamed in his eyes was something awful to see.

He merely held his hands aloft, and his men slunk backward like whipped curs, while the two who were holding Marshall down on the floor, rose and followed them.

There was not a word spoken until they disappeared through the door, and then the old man turned to Marshall and to Carter with a deprecating gesture.

"I have to apologize to you," he said, addressing both at once, and this time speaking in broken English. "I had not informed my men of this expected visit. They were on the watch, as they always are, and doubtless saw you enter. They but did their duty, as they saw it. I alone am to blame. Will you be seated, gentlemen?"

Nick Carter could read sincerity in the eyes of the old maharajah, and he motioned Marshall to a chair while he dropped into another.

Then the maharajah spoke again, this time directly to Nick, and in his own language.

"I beseech you, sir," he said, "give me news of my daughter. Is she alive and is she safe? The stars tell me that you know. I beseech you to tell me."

"Yes," replied Nick. "She is alive, and she is quite well, only very sad because of her love for her father, and her love for her husband, and her divided duty."

The old man closed his eyes and bowed his head. It seemed as if he were praying. But presently he raised his head again.

"It is three weeks since she fled away through the night, in this great and wicked city," he said, "and I have lived three centuries in that time. Sometimes I hated the young man who sleeps there, believing that he brought her to it. Again I despised myself that my soul had not been great enough to sympathize with her in her love for him. I knew not what fate had befallen her. The stars would not tell me that; and I feared—ah, what did I not fear? And now you bring me news of her. You say that she is unharmed; that she is well. Is it quite true?"

"Quite true," replied the detective. "She has been

under my care ever since that time. She went to my house that morning, and she has not left it since."

"Will you take me to her, sir? Will you tell her that her father does not offer her forgiveness half so sincerely as he seeks it for himself? I am an old man. I have lived all my life in my own country, arrogant, hard, unforgiving, relentless where one of our treasured customs has been transgressed. I have never cared to see beyond the boundaries of my own domain, and I have never thought any man right but myself. But now, sir, it is different. The blood of my family has ever been my treasure, as it was the treasure of my fathers; but my daughter is dearer to me, more precious to me. She has strayed away from the religion of her fathers, and among them she would be a pariah—but she is still my daughter. I cannot live without her, and I could not, I dare not die knowing that any act of mine has rendered her unhappy."

He left his chair again and approached Nick, extending both hands as he did so.

"Will you take me to her?" he said again. "Will you take me to her now? Do not mind the hour. It is nothing where so much is at stake. Will you take me to her now, that I may give her my blessing and seek her pardon?"

"Yes," said Nick. "I will. Come."

Then as the old man touched a bell to call his servant, Nick pointed at the sleeping form of Percy Owen.

"What of him?" he asked.

"He knows. I have already told him. He and Koohla, my son, are reconciled. Take me to her now. In the morning, when the sun is shining, together we will bring her here. She and Percy and Koohla and I will make our home here while Nadja wills it. Later, perhaps, we will return to India for a while. It shall be as she wills. She is my daughter, my adoration. All is said. I am ready, now, sir."

Payne Marshall strode forward at this moment, with extended hand.

"Sir," he said, "will you take the hand of an honest American who thinks you are a downright brick?"

The maharajah, regardless of loss of caste now, accepted the hand, for he understood the spirit in which it was offered, even if he did not catch the meaning of the words.

* * * * * * *

When the detective, accompanied by the maharajah only—for Marshall had insisted upon leaving them and going to a hotel—drove up to his door, he noticed with surprise that there was a bright light in the room occupied by Nadja.

"Follow me," he said to the old man, as soon as they were inside the house, and he led the way directly to the door of her room and tapped upon the panel, although it was then somewhat after three o'clock in the morning.

It was Nadja herself who opened the door—Nadja, arrayed in a flowing wrapper which the maid had purchased for her, and in an instant more father and daughter were locked in each other's embrace, while Nick discretly withdrew.

But after a little she came to the door and called him, and he entered the room.

"I expected you," she explained. "I knew that my father was coming. See! I have had another caller since you went away. Wait! I will show you what it is in a minute. Let me tell you first how he came."

"How he came? How who came?" asked Nick.

"It was an hour ago. I was awakened by a touch upon my forehead, and a voice—the voice of the man who brought me here, said to me:

"'Do not be alarmed. I have brought you a pleasant surprise. Your father has forgiven your husband; he has forgiven you; in an hour he will be here, and you must be ready to receive him. Forgive me for coming to you here, but I once had a daughter, too. Take this, with my blessing.'

"Then he dropped something on the bed beside me, and was gone."

Nick opened the package she placed in his hand, and found that it was a square silk kerchief, and that it contained almost a pint of brilliant gems.

There was a folded slip of paper with them, and Nick read aloud:

"The treasure of Gilbert Owen, saved for his son and his son's wife. Lost long ago, stolen, if you will, but now restored to Nadja, wife of Percy Owen. This hour is the happiest I have lived in many years. Pray say to Mr. Carter, that this is the Clever Grab, made long ago, to which I referred. He will understand."

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 443, will contain "The Mystery of the Front Room; or, Nick Carter's Marvelous Work."

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